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K SIDE:RED

Prologue

Ten years ago, Japan's map had been a little different.

Up until then, the Southern Kantou region could boast a much wider area of land. Nowadays, however, a large round-shaped dent marred it where a considerable portion had sunk into the sea and formed a crater.

“Officials” referred to it as the “Kagutsu Crater”.

“Seems like the former Red King's power was what did it.”

That was something he'd found out from Kusanagi.

Apparently Kagutsu had been the previous Red King's name. The name of the king before Suoh — a king who, ten years ago, had self-destructed and created that crater.

And so, the crater was said to be the form a King's downfall took.

‘Hmph,’ Suoh thought.

He felt it wouldn't be too bad.

If you had to bind yourself with chains in order to live in this small, narrow world, then he honestly found that abandoning yourself to a strong, overpowering urge and burning everything to ash as you met your own end was a far more enticing idea.

And it was precisely because he thought so that his stomach turned.

Chapter 1.: The Girl In Blue

As he sat backwards on his chair, Totsuka Tatara stared intently at the boy's face. In turn, the other seemed to almost sulk, somewhat bewildered, and averted his eyes from the scrutiny which sought to dig in deeper past his glasses.

“...What do you want?”

“Hm? Nothing, I was just taking a good look at Mr. Newcomer's face.”

They were inside Bar “HOMRA”, situated somewhere in a well-reputed area of Shizume City. With its lacquered floor and a sleek counter that almost smelled faintly of wood, the stylish interior didn't quite match its description as the gathering place for a violent gang of vulgar young men. The shelves behind the counter were lined full of bottles packed closely together – assorted beverages to the owner's personal taste, from the most common to much rarer stuff that could prove quite difficult to come by.

Even as ill-mannered as they could be, the boys unfailingly never went on a rampage inside, nor would they ever break things or make a mess. And that was likely because they knew it all too well; should they do such a thing, there would be no telling what kind of punishment they might receive from the bar's owner. Kusanagi was the pleasant kind of guy who always wore a detached smile,

behaved with good manners and had a great sense of humor; but, if he got mad, that slender arm of his could lock even a giant in an iron grip like no other.

Today too, just as usual, the boys were gathered inside the bar for no specific reason. They laughed about trivial things, and clamored loudly together, and their voices resounded along. To the members of Homra⁽¹⁾, this place was home.

For now, Totsuka had turned his back on that tumult and straddled his chair, choosing instead to observe the lone boy who sat in a corner of the bar and purposely avoided everyone else. He wore glasses with black frames and, from behind their lenses, he always seemed to only study everything around him with an air of perpetual boredom.

He was one of the boys who had just recently joined Homra after middle school graduation. The partner he'd arrived together with, Yata Misaki, had already completely fit right in, but this other – Fushimi Saruhiko – still showed no intention of opening his heart to any of the Homra members at all.

Roughly speaking, taking care of newcomers was something like Totsuka's job. Though, in this so-called 'taking care', he didn't really do much more than guide them a little. He took a look at them, taught them a few easy rules, and then they just made friends.

But, even for Totsuka, Fushimi had proven to be something like the perfect foil.

“Hey, Saru-kun?”

“.....”

Fushimi responded to that call by leveling a visibly displeased stare on Totsuka.

He should have just admitted that he hated being called Saru-kun, and then everything would be easier; but the boy just wouldn't open his mouth to voice any discontent at all.

When they were first introduced and he'd gotten a “Misaki-kun”, Yata had immediately yelled – “Don't call me by my first name!” – and then that had made everything much simpler. But this was an entirely different story.

For the time being, until Fushimi himself came out and said it annoyed him, Totsuka had decided to just continue to call him like that.

“Saru-kun, did you know? I'm actually super into shougi⁽²⁾ right now.”

“...Is that so.”

“But, you see... I don't have anyone to play with. Yata's terrible... or, more

rather, no matter how many times I explain the rules, he still won't remember. Kusanagi-san is really good, but he's always busy and won't indulge me at all. And then, I tried to play with King once too, but that guy's also hopelessly weak... It's like the concept of protecting the king doesn't even exist in his head. He only played one turn, and then immediately got bored and called it a stupidly draggy game."

"....."

Yet again, there was only silence.

But Totsuka didn't mind.

"So, Saru-kun," he continued. "Will you have a match with me?"

Smiling brightly, he watched Fushimi carefully for a reaction.

...No doubt about it, he was annoyed.

Fushimi never acted openly hostile, but he didn't exactly try to hide his inner frustration either, so his true feelings were still quite easy to read. He was probably the type who hated feeling coddled; so, if someone purposely tended to him like this and tried to get him to fit in, he'd only get annoyed. All in all, leaving a certain amount of distance was probably the better way to deal with

him.

Totsuka knew that well, but somehow he still found himself trying to tend to him. He really thought Fushimi was a very interesting boy.

“Totsuka!” Kusanagi called him from the counter.

When Totsuka turned to look, the man pointed with his chin as he continued to clean a glass, indicating the bar’s second floor.

“Go call Mikoto down for a bit.”

“What for?”

“He hasn’t shown his face for days, so now the things I needa talk to him about’re all piled up. Geez... Playing hermit like this ‘n the second floor of someone else’s bar...”

Totsuka laughed uncomfortably.

For all the racket they’d been causing not even a moment ago, the other members had sure all fallen suddenly silent as they carefully watched, curious to see what the exchange between Kusanagi and Totsuka might be about. Their King’s disposition was a matter of the greatest import.

When he was in a bad mood – or, it would have been more accurate to say he had these times when he just seemed to get completely lost in the depths of his own mind – the carefree joy of his comrades just wouldn't reach Suoh and he looked like he might murder everyone over a single touch.

Though it's not like he ever shouted or beat them up.

All he did was give those who came close just one look.

But that look alone could send his young comrades shaking to the point of being unable to stand.

As he gave a strained smile, Totsuka waved lightly to Kusanagi and headed upstairs.



The vacant guest room above the bar was where Suoh Mikoto had settled to live.

Apparently, he didn't care about his living conditions. The only things in the room were a sofa and bed so worn out they looked like they'd been picked up from wherever, and then he at least had a small refrigerator, which overall gave the place such an empty aspect it didn't even seem as if someone was staying

there at all.

He didn't care about privacy either, and Totsuka and Kusanagi could enter as they pleased without really getting any complaints.

But, as he hesitated a little in front of the door, Totsuka knocked just in case.

As usual, no response from inside.

"King, I'm coming in," Totsuka announced simply as he opened the door.

Suoh lay down on the sofa like dead.

Shoes still on, he'd propped his legs up and was watching the ceiling with empty, unfocused eyes.

Making his way to the edge of the sofa, Totsuka peered down at his face.

As if he found it a bother to do so, Suoh lazily turned his gaze to meet him.

"...What?" he said in a voice that sounded like it came from the depths of the earth.

"Lately, you haven't shown your face at all."

Suoh snorted a bit through his nose at those words from Totsuka. That gesture alone was enough to convey he already found this way too bothersome to deal with.

Despite that, though, even just lying there like that, he gave off a menacing aura.

He was an imminent danger, likely to destroy something any minute. So instead, to keep from exploding like that, he left himself to this abnormal apathy.

But Totsuka didn't mind and only smiled brightly as he called to him again.

“Kusanagi-san said there's a bunch of things he needs to talk to you about.”

“.....”

“You have to show up sometimes. It's hard for all of them to be in high spirits when their king isn't there.”

“.....”

“You know, King... Because you're in a bad mood, everyone's kind of worried. ...Anyway, Kusanagi-san told me to go and get you, so just come down with me for now.”

“.....”

No matter what he said, Suoh didn't respond. Lips curling down into a pout, Totsuka turned away from him and slid to the floor, sitting with his back against the couch.

“Did you have a bad dream?” he spoke from there.

Silence fell for a bit. Then, finally, there was a click of one's tongue.

“Don't remember it, so I donno.”

At the sound of Suoh's deep voice, Totsuka lightly closed his eyes.

“...I wonder what kind of dream I'll have.”

The noise from the bar still faintly reached the second floor. As he listened to that, Totsuka waited patiently for a response.

Out of the blue, Suoh reached out and grabbed him by the head.

“Woah...!” Totsuka cried out in surprise.

For Suoh's big, strong hand, it was all too easy to get a good hold of Totsuka's head. And from there, he swiftly tightened his grip.

“Owowowow...! Why!? King, why!?” After being constricted roughly for a while, Totsuka was suddenly shoved off. “Ouch... What was that for...?”

Acting completely outraged by the direct attack he'd received, Totsuka crawled away from the sofa Suoh lay sprawled on and turned to stare reproachfully at him, eyes almost brimming with tears from the pain. Even after he'd abused someone's head like that, the man still only stared at the ceiling with the same listless face as before.

“King?”

“...That head of yours would be easy to crack even with one hand, huh,” Suoh just casually said something disturbing like that in a bored voice.

Had he wanted to do so, Suoh could have probably smashed Totsuka's head as easily as he would have crushed an egg. Knowing all too well the hidden truth behind those words, Totsuka only gave a small wry smile. Stretching one leg towards the sofa the other lay on, he lightly kicked it with his foot.

“I'm alright,” he said, but Suoh didn't respond.

The sounds of someone running up the stairs could be heard. As Totsuka eyed the door, the footsteps which had so vigorously climbed all the way seemed to

hesitate there and stopped just outside. The next moment, there was a careful knock.

“M-Mikoto-san...!”

As expected, Suoh didn't react to that obviously scared voice either. In his stead, Totsuka stood up and went to open the door.

The one waiting there, large both vertically and horizontally, was the rather bulky Kamamoto Rikio. He must have been really worried about Suoh's state, as even while he'd pulled back warily he still kept trying to steal quick glances into the room.

“What happened?”

“There's a lady named Kushina waiting downstairs.”



“Honami-sensee⁽³⁾, didn't we say it'd be better if you don't come by here much?” Kusanagi spoke in a jokingly distressed voice to Kushina Honami, who sat before him on one of the stools at the bar.

“Don't be so cold, now. Here's one of my students, running a lovely place like

this. Of course I'd want to visit."

Honami cheerfully laughed. She was in her late twenties, but behaved so youthfully it was easy to mistake her for younger. Fair-skinned and bearing a calm, bright smile, she held a particular air of elegance, but at the same time, just like when they'd first met, there was a less formal laid-back side to her too. For example, just earlier she'd spilled a glass of water by accident, and then started to clean up on her own as she lightly chided herself.

A small, doll-like girl of about six or seven sat next to her. Her features were smooth like a mannequin's too, and her face just wouldn't show any expression at all, looking as if she really were an inanimate object. She wore a frilly dress, abundant in lace, like those seen on antique dolls as well.

The dress was a deep blue in color.

Looking at this customer the likes of which he obviously didn't get all too often as if to appraise her, Kusanagi finally brought out some orange juice.

"And you go bringing a small child like this 'n here too..." he joked. "When'd you even have a kid?"

Honami smiled wryly and shook her head.

“No, no, you got that wrong. This is my older brother’s daughter. Right, Anna?”

As Honami looked at her, the girl named Anna only nodded once, not saying anything.

She completely lacked the shyness of someone her age, and her expression more rather resembled a mask. Somewhat concerned, Kusanagi gave Honami a questioning look. Meeting his eyes, the woman gave an uncomfortable smile, as if to tell him it was a complicated matter.

Before Kusanagi could think of what to say next, the sound of several people descending the stairs made itself heard.

When he looked, Kamamoto and Totsuka were coming out through the door next to the bar, which led to the second floor. Totsuka brightly greeted Honami with an exchange of smiles. A little further behind him, Suoh also dragged himself in, looking groggy.

“Suoh-kun!”

Honami’s expression brightened even more and she looked up at Suoh. He only met her with tired, bored-looking eyes.

“...I told you not to come here.”

Face reading total discontent, he dropped himself on a chair one seat away from Honami.

Kushina Honami had been Suoh's homeroom teacher in high school. Back then, she'd barely finished her studies the year before that and was fresh out of high school herself. And yet, despite how he was generally feared by those around him, Honami hadn't cowered or backed off from Suoh at all.

Kusanagi, who was a senior in the same school, had also ended up in her care a few times.

Of course, Honami didn't know the details of their current situation. At most, she was only vaguely aware that Suoh had become some kind of prominent figure in Shizume City's underworld.

Homra had a lot of enemies, so Kusanagi and the others tried not to get too involved with people who had nothing to do with that sort of life.

But, whether this was because they'd known her from such early days or not, they somehow couldn't bring themselves to cut off ties with Honami completely. In a sense, it could have been said Suoh had a slight soft spot for her, and the same applied to Kusanagi.

Noticing this favoritism, the other members were quick to misunderstand.

“Ma’am! I’m putting your luggage down here!”

“Ma’am! Do you want a blanket for your lap?”

Kamamoto who had totally gotten the wrong idea about Suoh and Honami’s relationship, and Yata who assumed as well from watching him and was awkwardly trying his best to act helpful and considerate, kept buzzing around her as they tried to be of service. Not fully realizing she was being treated like the boss’s consort⁽⁴⁾, Honami assured them she was alright and thanked them each time with the same soft kind of smile she’d give to her diligent students.

As he just sat there with his chin propped in his hand and watched disinterestedly, Suoh suddenly lifted his gaze.

He glanced behind him.

“Oh, my,” Honami raised her voice in a bit of surprise. “Anna...”

The expressionless girl she had brought with her stood behind Suoh, staring at him as if she’d seen something rare and unusual. Even though she received a glare from him – or, more rather, a look so sharp it could have sent someone staggering – Anna didn’t seem to cower at all, and just conducted her

‘investigation’ with fixed eyes.

Without saying anything, Suoh also continued to look at her for a while.

A slight awkward interval passed.

Everyone around them fell silent as well, absorbed in that strange atmosphere.

Just as they were finally remembering to breathe, Anna abruptly turned on her heels.

Moving away from Suoh with calm, even steps, she headed for a corner of the room and sat down on the floor, not really caring her dress might get dirty as she pulled some marbles out of her pocket and started to play by herself.

“Now, that’s rare. For Anna to be interested in someone...” Honami said, glancing back and forth between Anna’s back and Suoh with slightly wide eyes.

“Well then, that’s a strange kid.” Kusanagi narrowed his gaze to look at Anna who still sat on her corner of floor.

Maybe because it was so unusual for them to see a little girl here, everyone gathered in the bar was also watching her with definite interest from a distance.

“So, what’ll you have?” Kusanagi finally asked all of a sudden as he noticed he hadn’t served anything to Honami yet.

She took a look at the black menu board.

“I think I’ll have some specialty curry,” she then said, calling gently once more to the seated girl on the floor. “Anna? Do you want to eat curry?”

Without turning to look, nor saying anything, Anna just shook her head. Honami forced a smile.

“Guess she’s not hungry,” Kusanagi said from the pot as he prepared Honami’s serving of HOMRA’s Specialty Tomato Chicken Curry.

“She doesn’t really eat much... But, will you prepare a little anyway? I’m sorry if it gets left over, though...”

“S’all fine, don’t you go worrying ‘bout that.”

Kusanagi pulled out a small plate and placed a bit of curry for Anna on it. Honami stood up to get it, but someone else’s hand forestalled her.

“I’ll bring it to her. Honami-sensei, you just keep talking to King.”

Before the woman could reach it, Totsuka picked up the small plate. Wearing a sweet, amiable smile on his face, he carried it off and headed for Anna.

“So what’s the matter with you today?” Kusanagi inquired as he lightly leaned on the counter. “Bringing that small kid ‘n here.”

Honami smiled somehow sadly as she scooped up curry with her spoon, and opened her mouth.

“It’s Anna’s day of temporary leave from the hospital.”

“Hospital? Something wrong with that kid?”

Turning his back on Honami for a bit, Kusanagi glanced at Anna. Totsuka had set the plate of curry down next to her and was saying something, but the girl didn’t even as much as look up at him and only continued to roll the marbles around on the floor.

“According to the doctor, there’s something wrong with her brain. It’s apparently a serious illness, so she needs to undergo examination and treatment at a special facility.”

Honami looked down, and some hair slipped from her shoulders. As he observed her downcast state and stared at her long eyelashes, Kusanagi frowned.

“Sounds tough. What’s she have?”

“The illness doesn’t have a clear name yet. She’s usually normal, but at times she’ll hallucinate and wake up with a headache, it seems. According to the doctors at the facility, if this disorder in her brain is left untreated, it could even endanger her life.”

“Hey, she’ll get better for sure, right?” Yata, who’d been listening on the side, nervously asked.

Honami smiled gently at him and Yata instantly turned red in the face, mouth twitching awkwardly.

“Yes, I’m sure she’ll get better. The doctors are doing their best to find a way to cure her, too.”

Doing their best to find one, which meant, in other words, it couldn’t be done with the currently available methods of treatment.

“She’s still so little, but she’s hospitalized all the time and barely gets one day of leave like this... She’s become a girl who won’t show her feelings on her face at all. She’s always brooding like this at home too, so I don’t even know what to do anymore...”

“She have any parents?” Suoh suddenly opened his mouth to speak after he’d remained silent so long.

He still looked just as lethargic, but it seemed like he’d been paying proper attention to Honami’s story regardless. The woman blinked in surprise and looked at him.

“You went to pick her up and you’re looking after her. Where’re her parents? ... They dead?”

He did speak carelessly, but the way he said it wasn’t particularly cold. Honami let out a slow, deep breath and then nodded.

“It was last year. ...My brother and his wife passed away in a car accident.”

Not only was she ill, but she’d lost both her parents as well. Anna was a really unfortunate girl. No wonder she had the stiff, expressionless face of a doll, and eyes like marbles that wouldn’t express any emotion.

“Oh, dear... now I almost feel like crying!”

As if to try and shift her feelings back into gear, Honami lifted her face and tried a bright smile again.

“This is Anna’s valuable day of hospital leave, so... Let’s set such gloomy talk aside for now. Hey, since this is such a rare chance, I wanted to take her out some place, but could you please give us some directions for this area?”

“I-I can give you a tour of Shizume City if you want...!” Yata offered, tripping over his words as he avoided looking Honami straight in the face.

When Honami gently thanked him, he became completely overwhelmed. Observing all of this from the corner of his eyes, Kusanagi finally spared one last look to Anna.

What a tough case to crack.

Faced with Anna, who wouldn’t even turn to look at the tomato chicken curry, much less address a single word of reply to whatever he said to her, Totsuka found himself at a loss.

The wooden boards must have been cold, but the girl only continued to sit there on the floor and prod at the scattered red marbles, rolling them around with her finger. To Totsuka, it didn’t seem as if there were any particular rules to this mysterious movement of balls, so he couldn’t tell what kind of game she might have been playing at all.

For a while, he only patiently watched. But, as his curiosity got the best of him in the end, he finally reached out a hand. Testily, he poked one of the marbles on the floor with his finger. Much like a game of billiards would play, that one rolled into another, clashing against it, and further propelling it into others which scattered about.

As her marbles were thrown into complete disarray like that, Anna stiffened for only a moment. After that, she slowly lifted her head in Totsuka's direction.

Since disturbing her game had finally gained him the chance to lock eyes with the girl, Totsuka childishly gave a bright smile.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Anna was silent for a while. And, as she kept quiet, she stared at Totsuka. Her general expression didn't really change, but maybe – just maybe – she might have been glaring.

“...I was looking.”

“Looking? At what?”

Lowering her eyes once more, Anna grew quiet again.

Totsuka studied her face in silence.

Although she looked very young, her eyes somehow showed an unusual trace of maturity. It wouldn't seem as if the reason she spoke so little was because she had any form of shyness or a fearfully withdrawn personality.

Those were eyes which seemed to have seen too much, or had maybe given up on something.

A gut feeling told Totsuka he might be on to something.

“...So you can ‘see’ things other people can’t?” he gently asked.

Anna slowly lifted her gaze.

Those lightless eyes found a focal point on Totsuka's face. But, although he was being intently looked at, somehow Totsuka didn't really feel that way. Those eyes seemed to be aimed someplace else.

“How do you see me, then?” he testily said.

After watching him in silence for a bit, Anna slowly picked one of the marbles up with her fingers, and held it to her left eye.

Their gazes met through the red sphere.

And, that instant, a strange sensation assaulted Totsuka.

It felt as if, through the marble, the girl's gaze could lay his insides bare.

Just slightly, he almost flinched.

Still expressionless, with that near-mechanical gaze, Anna continued to 'look' at Totsuka. The odd impression the girl's eyes gave off had him experiencing something maybe akin to the restlessness of fear, but Totsuka kept still and stayed peering fixedly at her.

Suddenly, Anna's body gave a jolt of surprise. She abruptly released the marble she'd been looking through, letting it drop from her hand as if its temperature unexpectedly rose and it burned her.

The red marble bounced to the floor, rolling away.

As if in a daze, Anna followed it with her eyes. Finally, her emotionless facial expression showed a small change.

"What's... wrong?" Totsuka asked, swallowing tightly before he realized it in response to her distressed reaction.

Despite how her face still didn't reflect any emotion, Anna now slightly furrowed her brows, and she bit her lower lip as if holding back something. Keeping silent, she started to gather the scattered marbles from the floor. As she did so, she kept opening her mouth as if to say something and promptly biting her lip, repeating the same process again.

Totsuka held his breath for a while, waiting to see what she was going to say, but then suddenly the tension lifted from his shoulders and they relaxed with a slouch.

"...Won't you eat? It's really good," he said as he held out the plate with a smile, causing Anna to lift her head in surprise. "I don't really get it, but... If you don't want to say it, then you don't have to."

Dropping her gaze to the small plate of curry he offered, Anna slowly shook her head.

"You can just eat, you know," Totsuka said as he tried to peer at her.

But Anna only stubbornly shook her head again.

"Alright, then. ...Ah, how about these?"

Leaving the plate of curry on a table nearby, Totsuka pulled a jar of candy from a shelf instead. Rattling it a little, he emptied some of the candy into his hand. The three that rolled out were a transparent lemon yellow, a light green melon, and a minty white.

Totsuka held his hand out and offered the candy to Anna.

“What color do you want?”

Anna didn’t reply.

Staying silent, she stared fixedly at the candy in Totsuka’s hand.

“Oh, I’m really sorry,” a voice came suddenly from behind. “Anna can’t see colors.”

Totsuka turned to look over his shoulder and was greeted by an upside down image of Honami’s face, as the woman had closed in on them at some point and was smiling wryly a little.

“Can’t see colors?”

Turned as he was, Totsuka tilted his head as Honami came to crouch down beside him. Picking up the jar of candy, she emptied more of its contents into his

palm. From there, she picked out a pink-colored strawberry one that had come rolling out.

“She’s color-vision deficient. The only color she can distinguish is red. If it’s this sort of nuance... She should at least be able to vaguely make out this candy.”

Looking fixedly at the deep pink, almost red candy, Anna nodded quietly once.

Honami held the strawberry candy in front of her face, and, after showing only one moment of hesitation, Anna finally obediently opened her mouth to accept it.

“I don’t know if it’s because she can’t see the colors,” Honami said sadly, “but she doesn’t eat or drink very much... Sorry.”

Eyes slightly wide, Totsuka shook his head.

“Well, all this might be related to her illness, too.”

“Illness?”

“This girl was in the hospital,” Yata chimed in. “She’s got temporary leave today or so.”

Totsuka looked up at Honami.

“Where’s the hospital?” he asked.

“In District Seven.⁽¹⁾ Usually we just go home from the hospital and then back, but today we ended up asking Yata-kun and Kamamoto-kun for a tour of Shizume City.”

As Honami spoke, Yata scratched the tip of his nose in embarrassment.

“Yeah, Kamamoto and I’ll be taking ma’am downtown,” he said, using his thumb to point at Kamamoto standing behind him.

Yata often dragged Kamamoto along to the game center downtown, so he probably knew the area there like the back of his hand.

“You coming too, Totsuka-san?” he asked.

After thinking a little, Totsuka smiled lightly and shook his head.

“No, I’m good. You make sure to show sensei and Anna-chan around properly. Don’t just take them to the arcade.”

“...Ah. What’s there besides the arcade?”

“There’s a lot of popular clothing stores for girls, and this one really famous café. The parfaits there are really cute, I’m sure even Anna-chan will eat one with Honami-sensei.”

“Huh? You want me to go into girly shops like those...!?”

As Yata visibly sulked about that, Kamamoto made a resigned face behind him.

“Yata-san? You do realize we’re escorting a little girl, right?”

Laughing, Totsuka evenly divided the candy still in his hand, and pushed half of them onto each of Kamamoto and Yata as he pulled himself up.

Yata and Kamamoto had a relationship similar to that of the leader of a gang of preschoolers and his henchman. Yata had barely joined Homra a short while ago, but their previous relationship from all the way back then seemed to have revived. Although, while he did follow Yata around all over the place, Kamamoto was the type who cut down wherever he needed to cut down, so to speak, and was overall pretty good at handling Yata and keeping him in check. If Kamamoto tagged along too, Honami and Anna were sure to properly have a good time.

With folded arms, Yata scrunched up his face and seemed to be reconsidering the course on which he should guide the two women, while Kamamoto had politely

taken their luggage to carry. Overseeing all of that, Totsuka nodded contently to himself. As he watched Honami's back while the woman put on her coat and made ready to leave, he started to eat the curry Anna hadn't even touched in the end.

Spoon in his mouth, he spaced out thinking of Anna.

And then, suddenly, he felt a weak tug at the side of his shirt.

When he looked down, he saw that Anna had grabbed on to his clothes.

“What's the matter?”

Anna gazed at Totsuka with her large, cat-like eyes, and then slowly turned with agile moves to indicate Suoh, who still sat at the counter.

“Hm? Something about that man over there?” Totsuka said as he brought himself down to Anna's level, matching her gaze.

With the dignified, austere air of a priestess who made a prediction, Anna opened her mouth.

“If you stay by his side,” she said while looking at Suoh, “you won't live very long.”

Totsuka's eyes opened wide.

He didn't understand right away what the girl was saying.

For a while, he simply spaced out, just gazing at Anna until finally he remembered her earlier, 'looking' at him.

"...You 'saw' that?" he asked. Anna didn't reply, so he continued. "Can you see into the future?"

Anna lowered her gaze a bit as she thought, seeming caught between both nodding and shaking her head.

"It's not like I clearly saw anything. I just... felt it."

As if expecting to be scolded, Anna closed her eyes and fell silent.

Totsuka didn't reply for a little while, but as he finally overcame the wave of surprise, the first emotion he showed on his face was not doubt, nor was it unease, but simply a strained smile of 'well, that's quite problematic'.

"I see."

"Are you mad?"

“Eh? What for?”

To Anna’s surprise, Totsuka only responded with even more surprise of his own.

Anna quirked her head to the side like a bird.

“Then, you don’t believe me?”

“Hm? Ah, that’s not it. But, well, it’s not exactly something I was expecting or would have assumed.”

Smiling, Totsuka caressed Anna’s face.

“Thank you for the warning. ...But, don’t tell anyone else what you just said to me, okay?”

Placing his finger to his lips, he spoke as if he were joking, and Anna watched Totsuka with glazed eyes.

“Anna? Let’s go now.”

At the sound of Honami’s calm voice, Anna quickly turned her back on Totsuka and rushed over to the woman’s side. Totsuka followed the two with his eyes as they left holding hands, guided by Yata and Kamamoto.

Ding, the light chime of the bell at the entrance could be heard as the door closed. Totsuka's gaze moved to Suoh and Kusanagi. Suoh sluggishly drank his alcohol, while Kusanagi was cleaning the plate Honami had used. As his eyes met Kusanagi's, Totsuka beckoned once with his hand.

“King, Kusanagi-san. Can I talk to you for a bit?”

Kusanagi traded a quick glance with Suoh, and then came out from behind the counter. Suoh, as well, got up from his seat without a word.

As they headed for the stairs to the second floor, Totsuka lowered his voice a little so the other members wouldn't hear.

“I think that girl is a Strain.”

Strain.

Unlike Clansmen, who were given power from their Kings, that term denoted those who had manifested powers naturally, on their own.

To begin with, what was a King in the first place? Totsuka didn't really know for sure either. From the information Kusanagi had gathered, coupled with what

scarce and dismissive explanations Suoh had even bothered to offer when asked, a “Slate” holding great influence existed in this country, and it was this “Slate” that picked a total of seven Kings and granted them power.

Suoh, as chosen by this “Slate”, was the titular Third King – which was to say the Red King.

Kings chose retainers known as Clansmen, and granted them power. Totsuka and Kusanagi were both Red Clansmen, who had received their powers from Suoh. A whole group of people gathered by a King as his Clansmen would form what was called a “Clan”.

Strain, however, were not affiliated with any Clan, nor had their powers been drawn out by a King. They simply naturally had them, and were stray ability holders.

Why were Strain born? That was a matter still shrouded in mystery.

Some theories explained them as mere errors resulted from leakage of power from the “Slate”, but there were also conjectures which claimed Strain to be ‘those who could not become Kings’.⁽²⁾

At any rate, as they were outsiders to all clans and had gained their abilities on their own, many Strain didn’t know a lot about their own powers either and were

just spun around by them, so there were many cases of those who used them for criminal acts.

“Such a small child’s a Strain, huh...” Kusanagi said, making a problematic face as he placed a cigarette between his lips.

“At first, she stared intently at King, right? I thought of this when Honami-sensei explained that she couldn’t make out any colors other than red, but... Maybe that girl was able to see King’s ‘color’.”

Suoh was the “Red King”. As such, it was quite possible that those who held powers themselves might be able to perceive the red aura around him.

“...’S that all the reason y’thought she’s a Stain?”

“No...” Totsuka hesitated a little as he opened his mouth. “You saw those red marbles she had, right? I think, instead of playing with them, wasn’t she maybe ‘seeing’ or ‘feeling’ something, more rather?”

As he took a long drag from his cigarette, Kusanagi looked distant as if thinking of something.

“What, ‘d she tell ya something like that?”

“...Well, that part’s a bit of a private matter, so...” Totsuka tried to cover it up with a playful tone and an amused curl of his lips.

Kusanagi furrowed his brows.

Totsuka faced him again as he readjusted his expression.

“Honami-sensei said the hospital was in District Seven.”

“Gold’s territory, eh? So, what you’re saying is maybe it’s not a hospital, but rather a facility for training ‘n studying Strain.” Dropping the ashes into a portable ashtray, Kusanagi gave a small sigh.”N if that’s so, then Honami-sense⁽³⁾ wouldn’t know a thing.”

Kusanagi directed his gaze to Suoh. Leaning against the wall, Suoh was silent.

“If it’s just Strain, then we don’t have anything to do with it, but...” Kusanagi said as if on purpose. “Here we’re talking ‘bout this girl who’s pretty much like Honami-sense’s daughter.”

Suoh lightly clicked his tongue.

“...For now, keep an eye on that brat.”

“Roger,” Kusanagi replied in a low voice to Suoh’s order. “It’s complicated what with her maybe bein’ a Strain or not, so for now let’s make it look like we gave Honami-sense and Anna-chan some guards.”

“Then, I’d like to know about the facility that girl’s being hospitalized in, too. Kusanagi-san, have you heard about an institute for Strain?”

“Ain’t that just a rumor? At the same time as teaching them how to manage their powers and educating them so they don’t turn criminal, they’re also studying the reason why Strain crop up, or so it’s said.” As he studied Totsuka’s face, Kusanagi frowned, forehead lightly creasing. “...I get what you’re worried about. I’ll try lookin’ into it.”

“Thanks. I’ll try to scout out as much as I can, too.”

What Totsuka was concerned with was that resigned, unusually mature look in Anna’s eyes. She was a Strain. Someone who held powers ordinary people didn’t possess. If that guess was correct, then that might be why.

But, what if that still wasn’t the full reason behind it?

“...Couldn’t become Kings, huh?” Suoh murmured lightly all of a sudden, and his expression looked gloomy.

“Wow, this new pork ramen is totally genius! They might be instant, but these chewy noodles...! And the garlic adds a nice flavor, but it still tastes like delicious pork too!”

For a while now, Kamamoto had been eating and praising some newly released type of cup ramen. Next to him, Yata made a serious, narrow-eyed face as he kept the apartment’s only room under close observation.

It was evening now, and they’d set camp in a park. They were sitting side by side on a bench, while Kamamoto had a hot-water dispenser and a plastic bag with some food next to him.

Earlier, a lovey-dovey couple had meant to enter the park, but as their eyes fell on the two who occupied the bench lined up in that fashion – Kamamoto eating and Yata with his arms folded, glaring fixedly at an indefinite spot – they’d made haste to leave immediately. Serves them just right, Yata thought in annoyance.

“Yata-san, want some?”

As he drank up the ramen broth to the very last drop, Kamamoto pulled out more food from the plastic bag with a rustling noise.

“No! ...And anyway, how much more are you still gonna eat?”

“You know, though, Yata-san. Never would’ve imagined we’d get to hang out together like this again,” said Kamamoto as he poured hot water into another cup of ramen, this time soy-flavored.

Yata side-glanced at him and gave a strained smile. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Yata and Kamamoto had been childhood friends before. Or, more rather, Kamamoto used to be Yata’s underling.

Back then, Yata was the strongest out of all the kids in the neighborhood when it came to a fight, so he put on the airs of a commander as he led the brats around all over the place. Kamamoto may have been one year older, but he was just a weak, sniveling fatty.

Yata protected Kamamoto often, so he also felt entitled to push him around and work him to the bone. And Kamamoto, who adored Yata and followed him around all over the place, fixed up his bad-kid image a little and made him look better.

This was that same Kamamoto.

The Kamamoto who used to haul his horizontally large body around with a great deal of effort to follow Yata around.

However, he'd joined Homra quite some while back, and since then he'd somehow climbed up the ranks to quite a well-standing position.

When he was little, he'd been just a short, pale-faced fat boy. But now he'd grown to a height that sure didn't lose to his large horizontal proportions at all, and his skin which used to resemble that of a white pig had gained quite the prominent tan.

When they'd met again in Homra and recognized each other, to be quite frank, Yata had gotten cold feet. But, even with that scary face he had now, Kamamoto had only shown the same simple-minded expression he used to when they were kids and greeted him happily – “Yata-san!? If it isn't really you, Yata-san!” – and so Yata had somehow gone back to his usual old confidence too.

Kamamoto's presence there was probably part of why Yata adapted so quickly after entering Homra – maybe only a little, but he had definitely played a role. Because Kamamoto, who was already quite a respected figure in Homra, called him “Yata-san” and listened to him, Yata had easily become someone the others looked up to despite how little time it was since he'd joined.

And so now, as he turned around to face his former underling and current valued comrade, Yata fixed his bearing and pulled himself up straight in order to carefully announce a matter he'd been giving thought to lately.

“By the way. From now on, I’m gonna be fighting a lot in Mikoto-san’s name, right? “

“Yeah.”

“Then, won’t I have to do something like... State my name to the enemy, or so? Don’t I need some kind of cool-sounding full name for those times?”

“...Just the usual Yata Misaki will do?”

At Kamamoto’s reply, Yata’s lips curled sulkily into a pout.

“That’s not cool at all, dammit.”

“Oh, right, I remember now. Yata-san, you don’t like your first name ‘cause it sounds like a girl’s.”

Annoyed, Yata punched him straight in the head. With a loud outcry of pain, Kamamoto brought his hand up to shield the top of his head. That sort of response hadn’t changed at all from when he was little.

“That hurt, Yata-san...” he said as he rubbed his head, eyes almost in tears.

“Then, what? Don’t tell me you thought up another full name for yourself?”

“I sure did!” Yata replied, instantly readjusting his mood. Standing up from the bench, he took on a determined stance, posing in front of Kamamoto with a hand on his hip and pointing abruptly at himself with his thumb. “Yatagarasu! How’s that sound?”

Kamamoto gave him a half-eyed, skeptical look.

“...Well... That’s fine?”

“What the hell’s with that weak reaction?”

“More importantly,” Kamamoto said, “is it alright for us to neglect our guard duty?”

With that, he indicated the apartment behind them with his chin.

“Ah!” Yata seemed to suddenly remember his duty and snapped back to the present, refocusing once more as he turned back around.

That’s right, Kusanagi-san gave us an important mission here.

“Still, those were some weird instructions,” said Kamamoto, in a voice so contrastingly relaxed and disinterested it just about shattered Yata’s entire bout of over-enthusiasm.

“Huh?”

“No, I mean... To protect ma’am Kushina and this little niece girl of hers? How should I put this, isn’t it kind of strange?”

Keep an eye on Honami and Anna and, should anything out of the ordinary occur, make sure no harm came to them and they weren’t in danger, then report immediately.

Those were the orders Kusanagi had issued.

Indeed, they were a little vague and odd, but Honami was Suoh’s significant other. Surely there’d be a lot of danger gathered around her, and defeating those enemies was their duty. This was what Yata had proudly figured out for himself as he enthusiastically gave it his all.

“They left guarding ma’am Kushina to us, right!? We really have to do our best!”

“...Yeah, but...” Not looking fully satisfied with that explanation at all, Kamamoto slurped all the noodles left in the cup at once, on a single breath. “Assuming there really was a possibility of ma’am Kushina coming to harm, weren’t her guards chosen kind of randomly? And from what Kusanagi-san said,

it sounded more like he was telling us to watch just in case and see if anything odd happens, more rather than to protect her. ...It really doesn't make clear sense at all..."

Yata's eyebrow twitched.

"You sure sweat some small details... You're a fatso, so have a broader mind too!"

"In the first place, Yata-san, weren't these orders for you and Fushimi?"

At Kamamoto's words, Yata froze for a moment and then gave a small click of his tongue.

"...That guy... He just kept saying how it's troublesome and stuff. ...Lately, that Saruhiko's been a real pain to hang out with..."

Recently, Fushimi's behavior had changed completely from when they used to hang out together in school. Trying to feign disinterest, Yata kicked the heel of his sneakers into the ground.

"Hm? Oh, hey... That over there..."

At the sound of Kamamoto's voice, Yata lifted his head. The other's fat finger

pointed at the door to Honami's apartment.

When he looked, Yata caught sight of a small shadow making to exit the room.

It was Anna.

“What's that girl doing?”

Craning his torso over the top of the bench to see better, Yata narrowed his eyes. On her back, Anna carried a rucksack which didn't match her frilly, lace-adorned dress in the least. She slipped out with careful, silent moves that showed extreme caution, and then softly closed the door behind her.

Kamamoto frowned deeply and quirked his head. “A child that small going out to play at this hour?”

“That looks more like she's running from home!”

No other reason came to mind for why a small child would step out of the house at night all alone, carrying a big bag such as that.

Yata and Kamamoto looked at each other, and then stood up in unison.

Anna was descending the apartment complex's staircase with hurried footsteps

and Yata took off in a rush, meaning to post himself at the bottom in order to catch her. But, before the two boys could actually get there, a different shadow appeared at the end, standing as if to block off the stairs.

It was a silhouette clad in a blue, military-like uniform. Yata could remember having seen that outfit before.

...The Blues!?

Having descended all the way to the first floor now, Anna finally seemed to notice the blue-clad figure that blocked her path down the stairs. With a sudden start of surprise, she came to a halt.

A million alarms sounded at once through Yata's head. Suddenly, it all clicked in his mind.

As he ran, he dropped the skateboard he'd been carrying nestled in the pit of his arm to the ground and jumped on. Whirring loudly, the wheels clashed against the pavement and scattered a rain of tiny sparks all around them. Like that, leaving Kamamoto behind, Yata bounded full-speed ahead towards Anna and the blue-clad figure.

The Blue was saying something, and as he spoke he drew a step closer. Blanching completely, Anna retreated one step in turn.

Yata had no idea how, but this guy had scared Anna. And now he was raising a hand to grab her.

“Hold it, you bastard...!” Yata shouted, and the skateboard flew into the air.

A red, flame-like aura engulfed the skateboard as it received Yata’s powers, and it danced through the air, closing in fast on the figure in blue.

And, as Yata sprang, his target turned to face him.

Those sharp eyes, which showed keen intelligence, held not a single trace of surprise. With agile moves, the blue sprang back lightly and fled from the path of Yata’s skateboard, taking a safe distance. As it landed, the skateboard screeched loudly against the ground and came to an abrupt stop before Anna. Taking a protective stance in front of her, Yata glared at the stranger in blue.

“Who the hell are you? What do you want with this girl?”

“That color your abilities hold... You are a clansman of the titular Third King, then. I should be the one asking you what business you have.”

The Blue was a man in maybe the first half of his twenties. He had a thin face, with narrow eyes that fixed Yata with a firm gaze from behind his black bangs.

Yata tugged down on the front of his shirt in response.

“I’m Yata of Homra.” On his collarbone, he bore Homra’s ‘mark’. “This girl is something like one of our members. I can’t overlook some shady bastard closing in on her.”

Sparing no more than a single cold glance to the ‘mark’ that had been so proudly displayed, with eyes that showed no emotion at all, the man clad in blue shifted his gaze back to Yata’s face. Just then, Kamamoto finally caught up and stopped next to his friend, catching his breath. But even as it became two versus one now, their opponent didn’t show any signs of distress.

Yata glared straight into the Blue’s thin, pale face. On the inside, he could feel his blood boiling already with the rush of adrenaline, as his body was ready for battle. Like pouring out from his skin, an aura of light had engulfed him completely – in red, the color of the one and only King who existed for him, Suoh Mikoto.

“I got it, blue guy. You’ve gotta be a Blue Clansman. You guys don’t have a King, right?”

Even Yata, who’d only set foot in this sort of world a short time ago, had heard at least that much. There were a total of seven kings in this country, and each of

them held supernatural powers. However, the Blue King had died in an incident ten years prior, and a new one had yet to appear. As such, the current Blue Clan, found without a King and just somehow miraculously retaining the structure of an organization, didn't amount to much more than just a gathering of people with special abilities.

Originally and essentially, the Blues – actually called Scepter 4 and recognized as a Clan from their blue uniforms – held the duty of handling cases in which those with supernatural abilities disturbed public order. A group which, to begin with, wasn't very compatible in character with Yata and the Red Clan.

But, even as Yata purposely tried to provoke him, the blue-clad man before him didn't so much as bat a single eyelash. His thin lips calmly parted, and he only spoke flatly.

“Stand back, Red Clansman. If you defy me here, you can think of it as defying the will of the titular Second King.”

As he kept a terribly serious glare fixed on the Blue in front of him, Yata whispered to Kamamoto beside him.

“Titular Second King... Who's that?”

“It's the ruler of District Seven!” Kamamoto urgently hissed back at him.

Still, it didn't ring any bells for Yata.

“What ruler?”

“C'mon, you know! That freakishly huge tower in District Seven? That thing's master is the Golden King. He's been a King since right after the war, he's the greatest king!”

Responding with automatic, reflex annoyance to the exposition Kamamoto gave, Yata punched him hard in the head.

“Ow...! Hey, what was that fo—“

“Moron! The greatest King is obviously Mikoto-san!”

“That's not how I meant—“

Finally though, from Kamamoto's explanation, Yata remembered. However confused he may have been about who or what the titular Second King was, the words “Golden King” easily rang home even for him.

District Seven was the political and economic center under this King's rule. And the conspicuously huge building which rose in the middle, Mihashira Tower⁽¹⁾,

was of course something even Yata knew of as well.

Kokujouji Daikaku.

That was the name of District Seven's ruler. The name of the titular Second King – the Golden King.

At the same time as being the King of those endowed with gold powers, he was also basically the actual King of the country. It was by his power, as he controlled its government and oversaw its economy, that Japan had grown to be as strong as it was.

And, as the symbol for all of that, Mihashira Tower stood to be this man's castle.

However, even despite all of that, to Yata it was still not much more than just “that annoying showy building”.

“Huh, I don't care if he's the titular Second King or the ruler or whatever, but I don't see any reason for me to be scared or sorry! In the first place, aren't you a Blue Clansman? What, your King died so now you're gonna wag your tail at the feet of another!?”

He scoffed — or, more rather, he was actually overtaken by genuine irritation.

A king was someone people looked up to with genuine feelings. To follow orders from another – and moreover yet, to proclaim that one's name – was only worthy of scorn as far as Yata was concerned.

Though, he'd barely spat out those words and the Blue's face drained of color. However mask-like it had been before, with features that would express no emotion, even that countenance with narrow eyes and thin lips seemed to crack the tiniest bit as a single corner of just one eye sharply twitched.

The very next instant, a blue wind picked up.

Giving little in the way of a warning, the man charged swiftly at them.

Yata's surprise only lasted for a tiny split second, before he promptly fell into a defensive stance, getting ready to block. He noticed soon enough, though, he actually wasn't the target the Blue had aimed to attack.

It was Kamamoto.

Like a bullet, the Blue plunged straight at him, drawing his sword.

Kamamoto wasn't slow to retaliate, either. However much he'd stuffed himself with ramen just earlier, he now moved his large body with contrasting swiftness, and dodged from the path of the Blue's sword as he leapt lightly back. His

figure, as well, was now draped in red flames.

However, even as he'd avoided that strike, the very next moment another shadow appeared out of nowhere behind him.

"Watch out!" Yata shouted before he could even think, and jumped with his skateboard. Feet firmly planted onto the board, he twisted his body right at the peak of the somersault.

Clang. The underside of the skateboard hit metal. The red and blue auras met, repelling each other.

As soon as they landed, the skateboard's wheels clashed roughly against the ground, eliciting ear-splitting roars. Without wasting a moment, Yata grabbed Kamamoto by the back of his jersey, and dragged him towards himself to pull him away from the second assailant. As he was rescued by Yata, Kamamoto's eyes opened wide to look at the attacker whose appearance he hadn't noticed behind him.

At first, Yata thought maybe the Blue had used some kind of mirror image technique.

The second attacker was indeed also clad in the blue uniform – and moreover yet, his face was a perfect identical copy of that of the first man who had been

standing before them. Literally the only difference was that the first man had black hair, while this one's was colored light brown.

“You two...”

They had to be twins. The two Blues, black and brown hair alike, regrouped side by side. Swords drawn, they gazed at the two boys before them.

Yata clicked his tongue loudly.

“That’s playing dirty, you bastard!” he spat. “Hiding there like that. There’s two of you and two of us, so just come up fair and square from the front!”

The Blues just tilted their heads, both bearing thin smiles.

“Regrettably, that isn’t...”

“...exactly our style.”

“Hmph!” Annoyed and disgusted by the close-knit twins who spoke in such a way as to split their lines evenly, Yata planted a hard kick on the tail of his skateboard. The front end lifted a little and, like a sword, he pointed the tip at his enemy. “Fine, then! I’ll be your opponent. You can both come at me if you dare!”

“Stop it.”

Suddenly, the voice of a small girl cut through Yata’s annoyed will to fight.

“Huh?” he turned to gaze at the source of that voice.

It was Anna.

Too caught up in his irritation with the Blues, Yata had completely forgotten about her existence. On the other side, the Blues seemed to have been in the same situation as well. Noticing Anna, they acted as if they’d suddenly remembered something and traded a glance with each other.

“...We have no reason to fight with you here,” the black-haired one said.

Yata frowned with all of his might. “The hell’re you saying, you bastard. You’re the one who started it, just now!”

“We were only responding to your insult,” the brown-haired one said.

The black-haired man looked to Anna.

“You do realize your position, correct?” he asked.

With a light tremble, Anna gave a faint nod.

“Who are these guys to you?” the brown-haired one asked her.

“...Honami’s... friends,” came the reply.

In a child’s mind, all of a person’s acquaintances were summed up as ‘friends’ automatically. This was likely nothing more than just that, but even so, Yata felt his heart beating fast as he heard himself called a ‘friend’ of the King’s significant other.

“Make sure you don’t forget whose jurisdiction you’re under,” the black-haired man pointed out coldly.

Upon hearing those flat, unperturbed words, Yata furrowed his eyebrows.

“Hey! The hell’s that, what’re you talking about?”

“It has nothing to do with you. Am I correct?”

Struck silent by whatever the brown-haired man’s tone seemed to imply, Anna quietly nodded again. Yata felt himself getting sick to his stomach.

“Don’t threaten a kid!”

“We’re not threatening anyone.”

“Just restating some facts.”

The blue-clad twins alternated their speech yet again as they returned their swords to their scabbards.

Noticing that, Yata kind of slouched a little as well. No matter what, he just couldn’t bring himself to attack a foe who had put his weapon away.

“...You chickening out?”

“H-Hey, maybe we shouldn’t needlessly provoke them too—”

“Shut up.”

As he told off a distressed Kamamoto, Yata glared at the Blues. No matter how you thought of it, these two were shady. He may not have known what was going on, but Yata was sure these guys had to be what Kusanagi-san had told them to be on their guard for. So, shouldn’t they just beat the crap out of them right here and right now? That’s what he thought, but as he remembered Anna’s voice stopping them, he hesitated to put that idea in practice.

Narrowing their already narrow eyes even more, the Blues displayed something

akin to a smile.

“We’re simply fulfilling our duty. Should you decide to obstruct us, this time you will be killed.”

“The Gold Clan may not be our King, but they are our employer. The only thing acting rashly against the Gold Clan here would accomplish is to make your King look bad.”

As they indifferently said all of that, the blue-clad twins once again looked at Anna. It was as if, using only their eyes, they had been coldly conveying something explicit. Leaving it at that, they both turned on their heels and, with stiff moves which contrasted the wind-like swiftness their attacks had displayed, they withdrew.

Stare fixed on their backs until he lost them completely from sight, Yata refused to slip out of his battle-ready stance until they were gone.

“...Wow, Yata-san...! You sure are the real thing...!” Kamamoto said excitedly as soon as the Blues couldn’t be seen anymore. “Well, I mean, I know you saved me a lot when we were little... And I did have a feeling you’d be really strong in Homra as well, Yata-san! But, this is totally on a whole new level! You might really even get away with calling yourself Yatagarasu for real! ...Ah, come to

think of it, did you forget that when you gave your name earlier?”

As he stood next to Kamamoto and received his enthusiastic discourse, however, Yata was preoccupied with entirely something else.

“...Kamamoto.”

“Wha...?”

Trying to put on a brave act over the childish face he was making, Yata abruptly turned his head to eye Kamamoto. As a trail of cold sweat formed on his face, he looked almost on the brink of tears.

“Kamamotooo...”

“Wh-What’s wrong?” Kamamoto stressed, taken aback by the pitiful tone he was met with.

“Are you sure it’s alright?”

“What is?”

“I didn’t make Mikoto-san look bad, right?”

Yata was concerned with the words that the Blues left behind. That “make your

King look bad” part just wouldn’t stop playing in his head over and over again. To him, Suoh was a strong and cool hero, and being of service to him was Yata’s pride. However, if his actions were to put a dent in Suoh’s image...

For only a moment, Kamamoto was left dumbfounded, but then he gave a strained smile and clapped Yata reassuringly on the back.

“Don’t worry about it! That was just idle talk from sore losers.”

“R-Right! That’s all it was, right?”

“More importantly...” Kamamoto said in a low, serious voice, turning to Anna behind him.

Yata also shifted his attention to her.

Anna looked so stiff and expressionless he really started to worry. Was this seriously not actually a mannequin or something?

“So what the heck were those Blues in the end anyway?” he asked Anna, who just stood frozen in place. “Do you know those guys?”

No response.

“...By the way, were you trying to run away from home or something?”

Yet again, absolutely no response.

At a loss, Yata turned to Kamamoto, eyes begging for help. But the other only made a face just as troubled as his.

“W-Well, that’s alright, I’m sure there are times you’d want to get away from home! Yeah. I mean, ma’am Kushina’s nice, but she’s a teacher and stuff, so I’m sure there are times when she’s all in your hair and...”

This time, there was a response.

As if trying with desperation to deny Yata’s words, Anna frantically shook her head.

At least this confirmed that she wasn’t a mannequin, though it only served to confuse Yata more.

“...So you’re trying to say ma’am Kushina wasn’t annoying or anything?”

Anna drew her chin and gave a small nod. Yata scratched his head.

“Then, did something bad happen at school? ...Wait, you were in the hospital all

this time. You probably don't go to school."

Slowly, Anna lowered her head, looking guilty. Just as Yata and Kamamoto found themselves even more at a loss, the apartment's door slammed open all of a sudden and Honami barged out, face livid with worry. She'd finally noticed Anna was missing.

"Are you sure it's alright?" Honami asked, an apologetic expression on her face.

"S'fine. Our place's got plenty of room to play, and there's no lack of guys who can babysit either."

It was an early hour of morning. Kusanagi had come to Honami's apartment together with Totsuka.

Yata and Kamamoto had given him a full account of last night's events. After that, Kusanagi phoned Honami in the middle of the night and offered to be responsible for taking care of Anna during the day.

What they'd told Honami was that, as Anna attempted to run away from home, Yata and Kamamoto just happened to be passing by. They'd left it at that. Anna's runaway attempt had been such a shock to Honami, it seemed, that she had very easily accepted Kusanagi's offer to keep Anna under constant watch and take care of her while she was at work.

After telling Totsuka to take Anna and go on ahead, Kusanagi lowered his voice.

“Did Anna-chan say anything about why she tried to run away?” he asked Honami.

With a sad and pained look on her face, Honami slowly shook her head.

“Not a single thing,” she said in a strained voice, as if the words themselves caused her pain when she spoke them. “Since last evening, she hasn’t said much at all. She was never very talkative to begin with, but... Last night, no matter what I asked her, she’d just freeze up and completely go stiff, acting as if she couldn’t hear or see a thing, or even speak at all. It was as if she really wanted to turn into a doll.”

As Honami let out a small sigh, Kusanagi gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Well, she’s such a small child ‘n she’s had to spend so much time in the hospital. It’s normal she’d grow difficult or moody. Our place’s always lively, ‘n Totsuka’s prolly good at taking care of kids... And, if I’ve got time, I can help with schooling her a little, too. Honami-sense, you can rest at ease ‘bout it.”

Smiling slightly, Honami looked at Kusanagi.

“Thank you. As soon as I finish work, I’ll come pick her up right away, so…”

“Well, about that actually,” Kusanagi carefully interrupted Honami’s words.

“While Anna-chan’s got hospital leave, why don’t the two of you come live at my bar?”

“E-Eh!?”

Honami’s eyes opened wide with surprise.

The Blue Clansmen were keeping watch on Honami’s apartment. Kusanagi found that to be a grave, serious matter.

Now that this happened, the fact that Anna was a Strain was as good as confirmed. And, if she had been assigned a guard, there was a significant chance that she was judged to be a “high-risk level” one, even. On a just-in-case basis, he wanted Anna and Honami in a place where they’d be easy to protect.

‘Make sure you don’t forget whose jurisdiction you’re under,’ had said the Blue Clansman that Yata fought, apparently. That was no joke.

And furthermore yet, beyond the chances of something happening to the two women, they also had to consider the possibility of Anna harming others, especially the person who was closest to her – Honami herself. If Anna was

indeed an inexperienced Strain, such a thing could easily happen even despite her not meaning to do so.

“I’ve got the second floor of my bar set up as a guest room. Mikoto’s being a nuisance and living in it right now, but I can kick him out for a while ‘n make it so you two can stay there. And I can drive you to school and back, too.”

Honami looked seriously troubled. Even Kusanagi himself, while he did try to persuade her, had the feeling he might have grossly overstepped his boundaries with this. Even though he’d found it improper for Honami to come visit the bar until now, he was suddenly offering to bring a child there – and moreover yet, to have her live there too.

But, even though she looked extremely apologetic, it seemed that Honami didn’t find that too questionable.

To be honest, a place where a bunch of vulgar and violent guys met up – like HOMRA – wasn’t a proper environment for raising a child at all. But for some reason, despite being a teacher, Honami apparently didn’t think so and seemed to fully trust Kusanagi and Suoh.

Kusanagi did feel just a bit guilty about it, but that still didn’t stop him from using both that faith and the woman’s worry for Anna in his favor as he

persuaded her.



Totsuka and Anna had been waiting in the park near Honami's apartment. Lined up side by side, they sat on the swings.

Kusanagi quietly glanced at Totsuka, inquiring about the state of things with only his eyes. Totsuka discreetly shook his head in reply.

While Kusanagi persuaded Honami, the duty of trying to ask Anna and find out more about the situation had been passed to Totsuka. But, by the looks of it, Anna had probably just fallen silent like a doll yet again.

“Anna-chan. It's come to it that you'll be stayin' at our place for a while.”

At Kusanagi's words, Anna lifted her face. Her glassy, bead-like eyes stared fixedly at him.

“Don't worry, Honami-sense's still gonna drop by after work. ...You see, we're your allies.”

For a minute, a slight measure of visible discomfort crossed Anna's otherwise expressionless features.

Kusanagi glanced at Totsuka.

Nodding once, Totsuka turned to Anna and held out his hand.

Palm facing up, he seemed to be asking for something. Even more troubled than before, Anna stared at his hand.

Just then, a tiny trickle of flame – colored red – flickered to life in the cup of Totsuka's palm.

Anna's eyes opened wide. The heat reflected softly off her big eyes and pale cheeks, staining them just a bit in its color.

As if to drop the small fire that sprung up in his hand to the ground, Totsuka swiftly turned his palm around to face downwards. And, that very same instant, what had been just a small clump of flame until now flared up unexpectedly, covering his hand in the blink of an eye.

Anna held her breath.

Spreading, like that, the flames engulfed Totsuka's arm.

As he noticed Anna's eyes darken with worry and unease, he lifted his flame-

covered hand.

Just then, the very moment the fire seemed to swell up even more, a pair of wings sprouted forth from the blaze.

Red wings, made of fire. As they flapped lightly in place, hot air and sparks scattered off from the cluster of flames.

And furthermore from the fire, the head of a bird took form and rose up. The bird of flame was raising its head, as if to gaze deeply into the distant skies; it flapped its wings yet again, preparing to soar...

And it flew.

The brilliant red bird of fire, resembling the immortal phoenix, detached from Totsuka's arm and flew up to dance through the air. Mouth gaping open, Anna followed it with her eyes.

Just one moment later, the bird of fire flickered gently like a spell being broken, and melted into the emptiness. In its wake, the leftover breeze of air it had warmed with its presence carried an afterimage of red as vague as the momentary imprint that light usually left on the eye.

Totsuka bore no traces of burns whatsoever. Really surprised after all, Anna

stared at the arm that had hosted the bird of fire only moments ago.

With the playful air of an actor, Totsuka brought the hand that had conjured the flames to his chest, and bowed only once.

“There was no trick or deception to it. ...Ah, wait, or is it a dirty move after all?”

“As usual, you’re a handy guy, huh?”

Half-and-half between impressed and fed up at the same time, Kusanagi spoke up. Looking as if he’d lost all his strength, Totsuka grabbed the swing’s chains and leaned on them for support.

“But I’m all worn out, Kusanagi-san...”

“...A handy, but really weak guy, huh...”

Sighing, Kusanagi turned to Anna once more.

Anna’s small hand was clasped tightly around the swing’s chain.

“There’s really no trick or deception to what Totsuka just did. And it’s not just Totsuka, but me as well, ‘n that Suoh Mikoto you met yesterday too, and all the guys who were at our place. We’ve all got abnormal powers like these.”

As if in a daze, Anna only kept looking at him. Kusanagi gave her a sweet, gentle smile like the ones he always used when he tried to seduce a girl. For some unknown reason, that earned him a cold stare from Totsuka.

“So, Anna-chan. Won’t you trust us?”

“Trust?” Anna repeated in a small voice.

“Yeah. ...Totsuka must’ve already asked you, but... Well, let me ask you again. Anna-chan, you’ve got some weird powers like these too, don’t you?”

Anna didn’t reply. She only gripped the chain from the swing even more tightly instead.

“Anna-chan, y’said you were in the hospital all this time. But the truth is, you’re not sick, right? Those powers of yours were found out, so you’re being taught how to use ‘em at a special facility. And your powers are being investigated too, right?”

Anna kept stubbornly silent. Just like Honami had said, she sought to become just like a doll that couldn’t see or hear a thing, and couldn’t open its mouth to speak either.

But, that silence she kept only answered the questions all the more.

“...We call those like you ‘Strain’. There s’posedly are facilities made for the purpose of teaching Strain all sorts of things, so they won’t put themselves and those around them in danger. But, if you’re to rely on us, it’s even possible you won’t have to go back to the facility.”

However, Anna was still stiff as a doll. They waited patiently for a reply, but there wasn’t even the slightest sign that Anna wanted to open her mouth, and only an uncomfortable silence stretched out.

With somewhat lost faces, Kusanagi and Totsuka traded looks with each other.

“...Did you understand what Kusanagi-san said?”

After all, they had been talking to a small young girl. Both Kusanagi and Totsuka weren’t exactly used to interacting with children on a regular basis, so they didn’t know all too well what words they should choose and how to explain.

However, Anna quietly nodded.

“I understood.”

“Then...”

Cutting off Totsuka's words as he meant to continue, Anna slowly shook her head.

"I'm going back to the facility."

Kusanagi and Totsuka traded looks with each other again. If Anna herself said that, there wasn't much else they could do from here. Giving a strained smile, Totsuka stood up from the swing and held his hand out to Anna.

"Alright. But either way, while you're out of the hospital, let's be friends."

Looking up at Totsuka, the girl seemed to hesitate for a while before finally taking his hand.

"...If you happen to change your mind, you can tell us any time."

To that afterthought, though, Anna gave no reply.

Interval 1

“Ahahah! King! Was seriously! Scolded! By a lady teacher!”

Suou grabbed Totsuka’s head with his bare hands while Tostuka was rolling around laughing until he was out of breath.

“Ah, ow! That hurts, king!” Kusanagi sighed deeply as he looked at Totsuka, who was writhing in pain while being pulled up by his head.

“Oh, stop that, Mikoto. He’s already missin’ a bunch of screws in that head of his, we don’t want even more to be fallin’ out.” Suou clicked his tongue and let go of Totsuka’s head. As Totsuka wiped away the tears that could have either been from laughing to hard or from pain, he incorrigibly smiled away.

“And anyway, Totsuka, don’t come into a bar when you’re just a middle schooler.”

“What about you, Kusanagi-san? Is it okay for you to be working in a bar even though you’re underage?” In reponse to Kusanagi’s candid words, Totsuka twisted his mouth and talked back.

The bar “HOMRA” was owned by Kusanagi’s uncle but he was an irresponsible

person and only opened shop on a whim, living a dissipated life. Kusanagi, who couldn't bear to just watch, started kind of helping out in the store, and all of a sudden at the age of eighteen he was something like halfway in charge of the store.

“Eighteen is mostly an adult, even if it's still underage.”

“Ehh...” While Totsuka was leaking out a half joking, half displeased voice, Suou was sulkily leaning his elbow on the counter.

“So, why'd King get in trouble? A fight?”

“Shut it.”

"Yep, yep. Well, it seems like the other guys attacked first, though. Mikoto won't pay attention to the hot blooded kinda teacher who scolds people without hearin' their side of the story or tries to force niceness on 'em, but he's weak to that kinda fluffy type. Not that you'd think it." At Kusanagi's words, Totsuka's eyes shone with curiosity. Suou clicked his tongue in an extremely bitter way.

“She's a fluffy type?”

“She's an airhead, that one. And on top of that, she's a new teacher, and she's young and pretty.”

“Ooh!” Right when Totsuka raised his voice cheerfully, the bar’s doorbell rang. Kusanagi looked up and was about to say ‘welcome’, but paused for a moment.

Speak of the devil, they say.

Kusanagi got ahold of himself right away, and smiled professionally as he greeted the customer.

“Honami-sensei, welcome to the cafe ‘HOMRA’.”

“Good afternoon.”

It was Suou’s teacher Kushina Honami, who had just been talked about. She had a soft smile on her face. She was a person who had the kind of warm, kind atmosphere that made you think she might smell like the sun.

“When did this shop become a cafe?” Totsuka whispered into Kusanagi’s ear.

“It wouldn’t be good for a minor to say they’re workin’ in a bar in front of their teacher.”

“...um, there’s a ton of alcohol lined up behind the counter.”

“It’s fine, sensei’s an airhead.” While Totsuka and Kusanagi were whispering

back and forth, Honami entered the store and sat herself down next to Suou. Suou looked at her unhappily.

“What do you want?”

“I was passing by, so I thought I’d try stopping in. Since a little bird told me Kusanagi-kun was working here.”

“That so.” Suou gave a frustrated sigh and looked away.

“Honami-sensei, what’ll you have? For tea, we’ve got assam and earl grey.” Honami smiled and put a hand to her chin like she was thinking.

“Hmm, since I’m already off work for today, I suppose I’ll have a beer.”

“...Kusanagi-san, she’s on to you. She totally knows this is a bar.”

“Yeah... well, I guess that’s obvious.” After whispering with Totsuka, Kusanagi said “understood” and smiled to change the subject.

He poured beer into a chilled glass. White bubbles raised a ticklish noise while rising.

“Kusanagi-kun, how is work here?”

“Well, the master’s a relative of mine, so we do things loosely.” Kusanagi smiled and said that as he put the glass of beer raising pretty bubbles in front of Honami. Totsuka looking at Kusanagi and tilted his head.

“Kusanagi-san, are you going to inherit this bar or something?”

“I wonder... well, with that master’s uselessness, if I don’t take over this place’ll probably close down...”

Kusanagi looked thoughtful, before suddenly looking down at Totsuka.

“Come to think of it, Totsuka, I guess next year you’ll be takin’ high school exams, huh.”

“Nuh-uh. We don’t have any money, I’m not going to highschool.”

“...I see. Well, you’re talented, so you can do anythin’. Wanna just work here?”

“Can I?”

“If we get an open position... but, even if you don’t go to highschool, there’s nothin’ wrong with studying, so if you wanna I can teach you.”

“Eh, really?” Honami, who had been watching Kusanagi and Totsuka’s

conversation, drank elegantly (though surprisingly quickly) while smiling and saying that she'd help too if they'd have her. As she was, Honami moved her gaze to Suou.

“What about Suou-kun?” At Honami's softly voiced question, Suou raised one eyebrow and looked at her.

“Do you have something you want to be in the future?” Twisting his face in a frustrated way, Suou leaned back in his chair.

“No.”

“Really? Even though you seem like you'd be able to become anything if you wanted to.” Honami said with a smile. When Suou looked annoyed and turned away, he ended up facing Totsuka who was in the opposite direction. Totsuka grinned.

“Right!”

Totsuka leaned up on the counter and talked to Honami with Suou between them.

“Right. Even though he seems like he could be anything, it's such a waste.”

“It’s okay.” Totsuka said this with his characteristic cheerfulness and irresponsibility.

“I’m sure this person’s going to become even a king.”

“Oh, my.”

As though infected by Totsuka’s smile, Honami also laughed.

"A king, isn’t that nice.”

“Yeah!”

Being assaulted by smiles on both sides, Suou breathed a deep sigh.

Kusanagi sent a sympathetic look at Suou, who was looking fed-up stuck between a cheery Honami and Totsuka.

Chapter 2: The Golden Cage

Anna was watching Suou silently from the shade of the counter.

With her small hands and feet folded and sitting while hugging her knees, the lower half of her body was hidden behind the counter as she softly peeked in Suou's direction. It appeared as though Suou was using all of his power to ignore the little observer.

"Hey..." Suou's deep voice filled the air. Kusanagi, who was cooking behind the counter, feigned an innocent smile.

"Yeah?"

"What's up with that?"

"What do you think, she's interested in you. Aren't you popular. Isn't it nice, bein' watched by a cute girl." When he said that cacklingly, Suou glared bullets at him.

Normally, Suou doesn't care about other people. He was of course used to being payed attention to, having people try to gauge his expression, and having his every move scrutinized. He'd accepted it as a matter of course.

But, when it came down to it, being stared at by a little girl with only half her face peeking out made it incredibly difficult for him to relax. Anna looked away in a manner that seemed very intentional, Suou moved his legs around irritably while leaning on his elbow, and Anna continued watching him as though it were deeply interesting.

Kusanagi's expression softened. It wasn't a terribly funny situation, but...

"Hahah, this is great. Been a while since I've seen you act so straightforwardly annoyed."

"Shut up."

Recently, Suou had been seeming to wear away at his emotions in order to keep the balance between his power and his mind. To Kusanagi, seeing that Suou make such an immature face because of a child was delightful.

Before anyone realized, Anna, who had been hiding half of her body in the shadow of the counter, had moved forward a little. She was still balling her small body up as usual, but she was a bit closer in Suou's direction, and now she was watching Suou from behind a chair. Suou's face screwed up.

"Hey, what happened to Totsuka and the others? Make them take care of her."

“Ah, Totsuka’s off with Yata-chan to clean up some outside business.” From that alone, Suou seemed to understand. ‘Hmph’.

Then, a red marble fell from Anna’s pocket. Anna started, watched the marble with her eyes, and stood up. The marble rolled along to Suou’s feet. He leaned down slightly and picked it up.

He had heard from Totsuka that Anna may have clairvoyant abilities. Kusanagi and of course Suou had figured that the red marbles were likely the medium for the girl’s powers. Suou, in a way that implied it wouldn’t be exaggerating to say he was interested, looked into the marble.

Through the red glass, Suou looked at Anna. When he felt that their eyes had met through the marble, Kusanagi’s whole body shivered.

...They connected.

Without understanding why, Kusanagi felt that. Through the red marble, two different people named Kushina Anna and Suou Mikoto were set to the same channel and /connected/.

Suddenly, Anna’s body shuddered and twisted. Her small body then fell.

Before she hit the floor, Suou, who had kicked his chair aside and stood up,

grabbed her in his arm.

“What!?” Kusanagi hurried out from behind the counter. While being held up by Suou, Anna twitched a little several times as though she were having convulsions, and then she went limp.

“I guess... we’ll need to call an ambulance, right...?”

“Yeah.” Kusanagi slowly let the strength escape from his tensed up body. He felt a cold sweat on his back.

“...what was that just now?”

All Suou had done was look at Anna through the marble he picked up. But at that moment, Kusanagi had felt that the two of them “connected”.

Suou clicked his tongue.

“That was careless.”

Kusanagi frowned, and looked between Suou and Anna’s white face.

“What happened just now?”

“Probably, this one’s /too sensitive/.” Suou gestured at Anna, and then looked at

Kusanagi to question what he was going to do. Kusanagi wordlessly replied by indicating the ceiling. Suou obediently carried Anna up to the second floor, and put her on the bed he usually used.

It was hard to tell whether Anna, having lost consciousness, was even breathing or not without looking closely, and one would be concerned about whether she was really alive. Kusanagi properly covered Anna's body with a blanket before turning to Suou. At the same time, Suou threw the red marble he had had clenched in his fist at Kusanagi.

Barely catching it, Kusanagi held the marble up to the light. Looking through the red glass, the world was stained red. He remembered Honami saying that Anna was only able to sense the color red. Perhaps Anna looked at the world through this marble.

"This is..."

"That's just a normal glass ball." Suou threw this statement out and sat down on the sofa.

"But, to that brat, it's probably a key for the sake of connecting to the world."

"A key, huh... then, that was..." Suou pulled some cigarettes out of his pocket and put one in his mouth. He then spoke around the cigarette in a slightly

muffled voice.

“She probably accidentally connected with me.”

Totsuka said that perhaps Anna had the power to “see” and “feel” something. If that power were to extend to a human’s inside and memories, then...

There was no way a seven year old girl would be able to look at Suou’s insides and be fine. Kusanagi sighed deeply, and also pulled out a cigarette.

“What should we do...”

Thinking of what would happen to the little princess their former teacher had entrusted them with, Kusanagi let out another sigh along with smoke.

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The Nanakamado Scientific Research Center.

-Is the institution Anna was hospitalized in. Up front, it was just a medical research center. There was a hospital attached to it, and it was a general hospital that many civilians went in and out of.

But in truth, its real main goal was to treat those who had been harmed by

incidents involving supernatural powers, and the research part of it focused on the research and education of Strains. It was a place like a combination of the golden king's public and underground sides.

“It's really fishy, how they're secretly grabbing Strains from the shadows.”

Totsuka smiled wryly at Yata, who was already raring to invade enemy territory.

“Well, even if you say it like that, most Strains don't know why they've got their powers. In order to keep civilians from finding out about powers and panicking, and to educate Strains and hide them from society, that kind of thing is needed... or so they say.” He'd been told that by Kusanagi. However, Totsuka was also not able to shake off his suspicions towards this “Center”.

Ever since the incident the previous night where Yata and Kamamoto came in contact with the blue clansmen, Yata had had blood rushing to his head. Last night, Yata and company hadn't known that Anna was a Strain, but when they were about to explain, Yata jumped to the conclusion that “those guys, I bet they're doing human experimentation on Strains underground!” and even Kamamoto was going “that's right, Yata-san! Let's go deal with those guys!”. But what they were supposed to do today was examine the Center. Definitely not barge into it.

Totsuka was, in a way, Yata and company's supervisor, but it was worrystime with just Totsuka who was a noncombatant, so they were dragging Fushimi along. Fushimi obviously didn't want to be there, but in the end he came along without objecting.

Totsuka, Yata, Kamamoto, and Fushimi, the four of them, passed through the general hospital's wide entry hall. With the reception counter patients went to in the corner of their eyes, they went further into the hospital. Totsuka and Fushimi, in their comparatively normal clothes, were one thing, but Yata who had a skateboard at his side and Kamamoto who was portly, had blonde hair like a textbook delinquent, and wearing sunglasses, stood out and drew stares.

"...Is it okay that we're being really conspicuous." From diagonally behind Totsuka, Fushimi said that softly. It wasn't okay, but, well, it couldn't be helped.

"It's fine, it's fine, it'll all work out somehow. More importantly, Saru-kun, this is the way towards the research area, right?"

"...please go up the staircase further in."

Fushimi replied as he looked down at his own terminal. Before coming here, they had had Fushimi using hacking to get ahold of the Center's outline. Of course, the hospital side's map was normally posted on the walls, too, but

nothing about the research side was made public.

Following Fushimi's directions, they continued through the hospital which was so big it would make a first-time visitor think it was a maze. After going far enough, the presence of other people got smaller all at once, and the staircase Fushimi had mentioned had a "authorized personnel only" sign on it, but they ignored it and went on by.

Going up to the forth floor and exiting into the hallway, silence hit their ears. Passing by places without much human presence, and after the hallway had turned several times, that door was there.

"Past here should be the roofed passage to the research area." Said Fushimi as he looked at his terminal. Yata suddenly put his hands on the locked white door, and tried to open it forcefully. Fushimi kicked him from the flank, on the flank.

"Ouch! What do you think you're doing!"

"As if it'll open from just that, stupid."

Yata looked sullen at Fushimi who looked exasperated, dropped his skateboard to the ground, and put one leg on it.

"I'll just break this thing into bits." As he said that, a red aura spilled from inside

Yata's body. Totsuka hurriedly held back his shoulder.

“Now now, hold on!”

“What!”

Fushimi sighed ostentatiously from behind Yata. He then went in front of Yata, held down the nose of the skateboard with his foot, and got in the way so Yata couldn't rush forward.

“Cut it out, dolt.”

“Wha!”

Being told that by Fushimi, who looked completely fed up, Yata turned red. In that opening, Totsuka dragged Yata away from the board.

“Kusanagi-san said not to make a fuss, right? Stop it with the 'if there's an obstacle, break it apart' approach.” Being told that by Totsuka, Yata frowned like a spoiled child.

“Then, what are we going to do? Give up?”

Totsuka shrugged his shoulders in a droll gesture.

“Nope. If we went back here, there’d be no point in having come. But, there’s also no point if we make a fuss and people gather around. I’ll do it.”

“Eh, can you?”

Yata showed his surprise so straightforwardly it was rude. Totsuka smiled and stood in front of the door. He put his hand on the door, pulled back a bit, and confirmed the places that were locked. Fortunately, the lock itself appeared to be something simple.

Totsuka stared closely at the gap between the door and the wall- the part that was locked. Then, he filled his gaze with power. At that moment, Totsuka’s body shined faintly red. His head heated up, and he felt like the insides would burn up. He endured that pain by clenching his teeth, and just focused his power in his eyes. Straining out his body’s power thinly, sharply, imagining something like radiating heat from one’s eyes into a physical object.

Like that, for tens of seconds. He continued to concentrate despite Yata getting tired of waiting and starting to fidget at his side, and filled his gaze with all of the thin power within himself. With a sharp noise, sparks flew from the part Totsuka had been staring at. After that, strength left his body as though the strings holding him up had been cut, and he wavered slightly. But, he stopped himself after only stumbling back half a step.

“It was a success... I guess?”

Totsuka smiled while breathing a bit harshly, and put his hand on the door to try pulling it. It appeared as though the lock part had been cleanly cut, and the door opened easily.

“...this doesn't count as wrecking it?” To Yata, who said that in an exasperated way, Totsuka replied dully.

“It's okay as long as we wreck it quietly.”

As he stroked the cut lock with his finger, Kamamoto growled in an admiring way,

"But man, you sure are talented."

Totsuka ended up hearing the same thing from Kamamoto as he had heard from Kusanagi that morning. In the red clan, Homura, most of the members have destructive powers. Within that, Totsuka was extremely weak combat-wise, but in place of that he was able to use his powers in strangely "delicate" ways instead of destructive ones.

The bird of flames like a magic trick he had shown Anna that morning, and

cutting off small objects with high heat. Of course, not only did they require an environment to quietly concentrate as well as time, and an extremely small amount of power, making it almost useless in battle but, well, it was pretty useful.

“But now I’m tired out... sorry, lemme take a break...” Letting some complaints spill out in the face of the lethargy that came after using his power, Totsuka kneeled down.

“We haven’t even started anything yet, you know.”

Even while making an exasperated face at the already exhausted Totsuka, Yata waited a little while. He gave Totsuka a hand when he got his breath back and tried to stand up again.

After entering the research area through the door with the broken lock, Yata rolled his shoulder, Kamamoto folded his arms above his stomach, and Fushimi pushed up his glasses.

“Now then, let’s go uncover some evildoing!”

Along with Yata’s yell, the four of them stepped into the Center’s research area corridor.

++++++

It was the usual, tiresome dream again.

Suou was standing in the middle of a burnt wasteland. It was a vacant lot with only the remnants of crumbled buildings and such to be seen vaguely, with thin smoke rising, and a burnt smell permeating. Suou stood alone in the center of it. There wasn't a single person other than him who was alive.

...no.

"Don't come into someone else's dream."

Saying that lightly, Suou turned around. Behind him was a doll-like girl wearing lacy blue clothes. At a single glance, he understood that it wasn't just an existence brought to life by his own dream. The girl standing in front of him existed as a distinct, different

personality that had nothing to do with his will or unconsciousness. The girl-Anna tilted her head with her expression still blank.

"I'm sorry."

She said that without a shred of apologeticness. Suou breathed in lightly, pulled

out a cigarette, and put it in his mouth.

“...s'okay. In fact, sorry for showing you something weird.”

This was probably a result of Anna ending up "connected" with Suou using her power and the marble. They were sharing dreams. Anna slowly looked around the wasteland with smoldering burns.

“Mikoto.”

Suddenly, Anna called Suou's name. His eyes widened slightly. He shouldn't have introduced himself to her yet, but then he thought that Honami must have told her for just a moment, before immediately realizing that that train of thought was idiotic. He and Anna were “connected”. Not only his name, it wouldn't be strange if Anna knew everything about Suou's past.

“Did Mikoto do this?” Even though she spoke in such a halting way, Anna said this strangely maturely. Suou didn't reply, sat himself down on some remaining rubble, and breathed out some tobacco smoke. Come to think of it, this may have been the first time he had heard Anna's voice.

“Do you know about the Kagutsu Crater?”

Anna tilted her head at Suou's question.

“It’s something that happened before you were born, but in the past the lay of the land was a bit different. One day, the southern part of the Kantou region went flying, leaving just a crater.”

Anna silently looked up at Suou.

“Apparently, that thing was caused by a single human’s powers going out of control.”

To be specific, it was the power of the previous red king. Ones who become king have powers beyond human knowledge, but once they lose the balance needed to control their powers, the powers go berserk, and the king is disciplined by the “Sword of Damocles”. That discipline doesn’t only destroy the king, but also causes huge damage to what is around them. The falling of the Sword of Damocles is the one thing that must be prevented at all costs.

“...will that happen to Mikoto, too?”

In response to the small girl’s straightforward question, Suou smiled self-depreciatingly.

“Who knows.”

Honestly, there were moments where he thought that wasn't bad. Moments where he thought he would want to just use up all of his power.

But the sight waiting after that is what's shown in this damned dream. This was Shizume City, having been completely destroyed by Suou's power. And that, to Suou, was how the future would be.

Anna was silent for a while, looking straight at Suou. And then, she slowly opened her mouth.

"You have something you can't throw away, don't you."

Suou frowned at her words. What a cheeky brat, he thought. Sometimes, he was assaulted by urges to destroy that were difficult to control. Sometimes he wanted to let loose the aching power within him, taste a moment where his blood could boil, and throw away all the shackles binding him.

However, Suou was aware of the things that he would lose if he were to end up doing that. And so, whenever he was assaulted by those urges, in order to kill them, he would chip away at his feelings and ambitions, becoming like a living corpse.

That was a way to protect the people around him from himself.

“Mikoto.”

Suddenly, Anna spoke.

“Mikoto is pretty.”

Being called something he had never been called in his entire life, Suou made a questioning face. Come to think of it, he remembered that Anna was only able to see red, and that she was able to see the red color of his powers. He sighed lightly.

“You’re a difficult brat, too, aren’t you.”

Upon opening his eyes, Suou saw Anna, who was sitting up on the bed. Still lying on the couch, he turned his face to look at her. After carrying Anna who had fainted to the bed, Suou had nothing to do and dozed off on the sofa. And then, they accidentally shared their dreams, most likely.

“...Are you feeling okay?”

Anna no longer had a white face like she did when she fell. To Suou’s question, she nodded a little.

“I see.”

What a weird kid, Suou thought as he closed his eyes again.

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Fushimi's glasses reflected light from the monitor as he faced the computer. From behind, Totsuka and Yata peeked at what he was doing.

Yata and company had successfully invaded the Center's research area and were breaking through the security of a computer to take a look at the data within.

"Hey, how much longer? If you don't hurry, someone's gonna come."

"You're annoying. Be quiet."

Fushimi replied in an annoyed way to Yata, who was irritably rushing him. Kamamoto was keeping watch at the door to make sure no one would come. Several times, someone would pass through the hallway and make them nervous.

"...this, huh."

Along with Fushimi's small whisper, a search window opened. In it, Fushimi typed 'Kushina Anna'. Along with blinking words saying one had been found, Anna's face appeared. Her doll-like photograph and profile were shown first.

Within that profile was the matter of the day her parents died.

Kushina Tetsuya and Ayuri died in a traffic accident. They crashed due to a malfunction with their breaks. They both died instantly from cerebral contusion.

Yata scowled at the facts written. Remembering Anna, who was so expressionless despite her age, he almost started feeling bad, and quickly shook his head. Fushimi scrolled down more. What continued down the article was written in a difficult, jumbled up way, but even Yata could tell it was talking about Anna's abilities as a Strain.

Anna's abilities were 'high level empathic powers'. On top of that, it was labeled 'danger levels high. observation required'. Yata frowned.

"Is that kid's power really something that dangerous? It's just that she's seeing lots of different things, right? How is that bad?"

To what Yata said, Fushimi snorted a bit as he ran his eyes down the screen.

"In other words, either there's a danger that it's not just something like clairvoyance, or they want to be able to use 'because she's dangerous' as an excuse."

When Yata looked like he was about to question that, Kamamoto moved.

Jumping back from the door he had been watching out of, he whispered 'someone's coming!'. Fushimi clicked his tongue, closed the window with Anna's information in it, and forcibly shut off the computer.

The four of them hiding themselves in the shadow of a desk and the room's door opening happened at almost the same moment. Opening it loudly, a man in a white coat came in.

"Hm? Who left this mess out?" Saying that in a suspicious voice, the man approached. While the computer was turned off, they had ended up leaving a bunch of files open on the desk.

Watching the man's face from the shadow of the desk, Yata thought. Should they run across the floor and escape? But if four men moved, then surely they'd be noticed. There wasn't any choice but to use force.

When Yata began to stand up, having decided to beat the guy up and shut him up, Totsuka noticed it just in time and held him back. Without actually saying anything, they gave each other looks that said 'What are you doing!?' and 'Calm down!' silently, then Totsuka while still holding Yata down gestured at Fushimi with his other hand.

Fushimi sighed slightly, moved along the floor, and when the man came up to

the desk he swiftly got behind him. Fushimi hit the back of the man's neck with a chop. It was light, but the man in the white coat fell without a single sound. Yata looked indignant and turned to Totsuka who was holding him.

"Why'd you let Saruhiko do it even though you stopped me?"

"You were just going to beat him up like usual, right? I keep telling you it'll be bad if we make a fuss."

Yata looked away feeling sulky when Totsuka said that. That was true, so he couldn't complain, but as it was, he felt like Fushimi was more trusted than him, so he didn't like it.

"Though, now that this has happened, it's only a matter of time until they find out we've sneaked in."

Totsuka, who looked unconcerned about Yata's sulking, folded his arms and said,

"If we had to say what else we wanted to check out, it would be..."

He looked at Fushimi, who said with a bored look,

"Of course, the place where they've actually got the Strains, right."

+++++

It was a surprisingly peaceful scene in the place they reached by following the map of the Center Fushimi had hacked.

Rather than a facility, it had an atmosphere more like a school dorm, and people who appeared to be Strains were loitering around. Coming this far, the four of them looked less out of place than they did in the hospital. If it was within the Strains who walked around freely, then there wasn't a need for Yata and company to hide, and it was surprisingly simple for them to mix in.

"Things look unexpectedly free, don't they. I thought it'd be a place more like a lab or something."

Said Kamamoto as he hurriedly looked around the area. Yata shoved Kamamoto's head down with one hand.

"Don't look around! They'll think something's up!"

"You're noisy, too." Fushimi said as he looked at Yata dully. Looking down at his terminal, Fushimi whispered like he was talking to himself.

"...the reason why this place is so open is probably just because the only Strains

here are ones without particularly great powers. Guys with more important or dangerous ones would be more properly isolated... looking at this, that's probably underground."

Fushimi looked to the side at Totsuka.

"What do you want to do? If you want to get in there, then not making a fuss... I think it'll be impossible."

In response to Fushimi's heatless, indifferent words, Totsuka smiled away in an unconcerned way.

"That'd be bad. I guess we can't go that far. We need to do our best to stay out of trouble this time."

Without going in any deeper, then what they could do to get as most information as they could would be...

As Yata folded his arms to think, someone spoke to them from behind.

"Hm? I haven't seen you all around. New guys?"

The one who spoke to them was a friendly-looking Strain boy of about seventeen or eighteen. Just what they needed. Yata put on a smile. With an

expression so bright it was fakey, he went up to the boy and threw an arm around his shoulders like they were good friends.

“Hey, sorry, but could you talk to us for a sec?”

The Strain boy’s face was drawn when Yata’s smile suddenly invaded his personal space.

“Sooo, basically, we came to check and make sure you guys aren’t being treated unfairly. Got it?”

In the deserted hallway they had taken the Strain boy to, Yata was saying that to him in a threatening way, arm still around his shoulders.

At a glance, it looked like they were in the process of shaking him down.

Yata who completely had the taste of a thug who was acting under the guise of friendliness, the huge-bodied Kamamoto who wasn’t saying anything but just standing there to the side, Fushimi who was boredly leaning against the window and looking outside with an unreadable expression, and finally, Totsuka whose thoughts were impossible to read under his smiley face.

The Strain boy was totally nervous.

“...um, no... there’s nothing particularly unfair... the food’s actually pretty good...”

“There’s something, isn’t there! Getting forced into human experiments called "check-ups", or being treated like cows, or getting beaten up when you disobey at all!”

"No... not really..."

The boy scratched his chin with a completely troubled face as he looking from side to side as if to find a way to escape.

“In fact, since you can get some compensation if you cooperate with the examinations, some people come just because they want to... I mean, I’m one of them...”

“Aah?” Yata ended up letting out a threatening voice at this situation, where it seemed like the theory about the Center being the bad guys wasn’t matching up.

Strange. Even though the blues who appeared in front of Anna last night showed a bad atmosphere.

“Even if that’s true for you, do you know anything about how the Strains with stronger powers are treated?” Totsuka asked with a smile.

“Not really... well, there’s lots of weird rumors, though.”

Yata leaped at what the Strain boy mumbled immediately.

"Hey, hey, there IS something! Try telling us.”

“No, but, it’s just a baseless rumor... that in the basement, there’s Strains who were caught committing crimes and they’re being secretly experimented on to turn them into something like living weapons...”

“That, that, that, that!” Yata got excited and his eyes shone. In contrast, the Strain boy got less and less excited.

“...it’s seriously just a rumor. There’s not many guys who take it seriously.”

“No, they’re totally experimenting on Strains. My intuition says so.” Yata folded his arms and nodded to himself.

“Have any other weird things been going on?” When Totsuka asked, the Strain boy tilted his head in a troubled way.

“Even if you say that, what’s weird and what isn’t... I’ve even gotten used to stuff like the 'Rabbit’s’ inspections even though they took me by surprise at first,

so...”

“The rabbit’s inspections?” Yata frowned at the weird-sounding word.

“You don’t know about the 'Rabbits’? They’re the guys with the weird masks. They wear a creepy mask that’s got something like rabbit ears sticking out, and they wear something like kimono... they come at certain times and look around the center. It’s super creepy. Since they’re all wearing the same masks and kimono so you can’t tell them apart at all. Instead of a group of people, they feel more like different creatures...”

“...They’re personal guards.”

Totsuka spoke.

"They’re a group who never show their faces and their identities are unknown. They wait on the golden king, and if they receive orders they’ll do anything... the reason why superpowered kings are able to exist without causing much of a fuss is thanks to the 'Rabbit’s’ information control unit. They show up when something happens that could cause a panic in society and make the memories people have related to dangerous things vague, apparently... I guess the 'inspections’ are them coming to check and make sure everything’s being run properly."

Yata went 'hmp' as Totsuka spoke while looking off into space, trying to recall.

"If the personal guards' examinations are that exaggerated, then even if this facility is under the Golden King's reign, it doesn't seem like he trusts them all that much."

Totsuka nodded. Watching Fushimi and Totsuka's conversation, Yata went 'hmm' and let his voice spill out.

"Not being able to trust his own comrades or whatever, that golden king guy's a weirdo." He thought it was the kind of thing that would be unthinkable in Homura. Suddenly, he realized that Fushimi was looking coldly in his direction.

Totsuka smiled wryly as though to intervene.

"Well, the golden clan is so huge compared to everyone else you can't compare them, so it's completely different from us."

"You guys, you're red clansmen... huh." Said the Strain boy as he looked at Yata and the others. Kamamoto stepped forward, cornering the boy.

"Don't tell anyone about us, 'kay? ...Anyway, when those 'Rabbit'? Guys come to inspect things, do the guys here act like they're trying to hide something, or anything like that?"

The boy looked like he was desperately trying to think.

"Aah... well... the Center guys look kinda nervous before the 'Rabbits' come. Come to think of it, Mizuchi-san also-"

Partway through what the boy was saying, Yata felt a chill run down his neck. Before confirming the situation, he followed his instincts and shoved the talking boy away before jumping back.

Where Yata and the boy had been standing a moment ago, along with a sharp cutting sound there was a silver flash. Yata's cheek hurt. He turned around. To the side, he saw Fushimi get out several knives and get ready in the corner of his eye.

Behind Yata and company, there was a guy in blue holding an unsheathed saber. Thin eyes looking out from under a long black fringe, and thin lips. Cheeks that looked smooth.

"You..." Yata glared at the blue guy. He felt blood run down his cheek. His skin had surely been cut slightly. He had been cut at from behind with no warning.

"I didn't think we'd meet again so soon." On a face that looked like a Noh mask, the guy in blue wore a slight smile. It was the blue clansman Yata and

Kamamoto had come in contact with last night.

“I said that the next time we decide you’re in the way of our mission, we’ll kill you, right?” From behind the black-haired blue guy, another blue guy with light brown hair and the exact same face appeared, saying this while mixing glee into his smooth voice.

“...Yata.”

“These guys are the creepy twins we met last night.” Yata said in response to Totsuka’s quiet question without looking away from the twins in blue. He had a cold sweat on his back. He had only just recently become a clansman and didn’t have much experience, but he was blessed in power. And yet he (and, as far as he could tell, Fushimi) hadn’t noticed the blues at all until the moment they attacked.

“Haha!” Laughed the black haired guy in blue.

“Fufu!” Laughed the brown haired guy in blue as well.

“You’re intruders, aren’t you?”

“You’re who we’re too eliminate, aren’t you?”

Totsuka looked between the blue twins who spoke alternatingly with a smile that was starting to look a bit nervous.

“...if we surrender quietly, would you listen to what we have to say?”

“It’s no good, Totsuka-san. You should get back.” Yata dropped his skateboard to the ground and put one foot on it, getting into position. No matter how he looked at it, it didn’t seem like they’d be able to negotiate peaceably. They had killing intent leaking out.

Totsuka obediently took a few steps back.

“I’ll follow your warning, but in truth, we’re the ones at fault here, so don’t do anything rash. Our goal is to retreat.”

"If it were possible, I’d like to do that.” Said Fushimi in a quiet voice. The brown-haired guy in blue slowly drew his sword. The two of them took a stance with their swords pointing at their opponent’s face together.

“Scepter 4, Minato Hayato.”

“Also Scepter 4, Minato Akito.”

“We will advance with sword in hand.”

“For our cause is pure.” The twins in blue said that in turn, in voices holding no emotion.

“...for future reference, can I ask what you two’s ‘cause’ is?” In response to Totsuka’s question, the two of them lifted the corners of their mouths more.

“The punishment of those who would break the rules.” The twins spoke in sync.

Yata and Fushimi stood forward as though to confront the twins, while Totsuka and Kamamoto were behind them. If they hadn’t been like that, then Totsuka may have been the first targeted.

The black-haired guy in blue- Hayato move. He ran in Yata’s direction. To avoid his sword, which came down from above their heads, Yata slipped to the side on his skateboard. At the same time, he collected power in his right fist. The power in his right fist shone red, and right after the sword was lowered he tried to bury that fist into Hayato’s stomach.

But, right then, he felt a presence behind him. All of a sudden, the brown-haired guy in blue- Akito was behind Yata. Yata, who had been distracted by Hayato’s attack, had a sword soundless slashed at his back.

...Shoot.

These two aim for one person together.

This was something he had learned last night. As he was about to click his tongue at his own carelessness, a knife surrounded by a red aura came flying. Akito's saber, which was about to cut Yata's back, immediately changed direction to intercept the knife.

The clanging sound of blade on blade resounded.

It was Fushimi. Fushimi was holding knives that shone red with the power he had filled them with. With eyes one couldn't imagine from his usual unmotivated form, he was looking dangerously at the twins.

“...is it your style to attack the weaker guy and take him down together?”

Yata was offended by Fushimi's way of saying it. He had already experienced the fact that these guys wouldn't fight fairly one-on-one, but he couldn't accept the 'weaker guy' part.

But, the twins smiled.

“That's right.”

“Hey, hold on! Whaddya mean?! Are you trying to say I’m weaker than Saruhiko!?”

“Totsuka-san.” Ignoring Yata’s howls, Fushimi called out to Totsuka in a cool voice.

“Protecting you is a pain.”

Totsuka nodded immediately. Understanding that he had been told he’d be holding them back, he grabbed the arm of the Strain boy who hadn’t been able to get up after being thrown away by Yata, pulled him up, and started to escape from there together.

"Saru-kun, Yata, what’s our aim?" Even while moving away from the sudden battlefield, Totsuka spoke. Fushimi replied in an annoyed way.

“To escape from here, right.”

“Right. Don’t get done in!”

“Please hurry up.”

Smiling wryly at how annoyed Fushimi sounded, Totsuka ran off.

"Kamamoto, you go too!" Yata said as he glanced to the side at Kamamoto.

"Yata-san..." Kamamoto looked worriedly between Yata and company who were confronting the blues, and Totsuka who was leaving, while not sure what to do.

"There might still be other blues around. Go with Totsuka-san!"

"Ri, right!"

At Yata's words, Kamamoto was finally able to decide, and went after Totsuka who was already running ahead.

"Now, then."

With a bulging vein, Yata glared at the twins in blue.

"I've been reminded of the unfair strategy you guys use. Fine, come at me together!"

Putting one foot on his skateboard, Yata let out a red auro that seemed to flow from his entire body. The red aura gained heat, and the room's temperature rose abruptly. The aura in his right fist was realized and took the form of flames. The ends of the flames crackled. Yata turned his blazing eyes on the twins.

"Don't show off alone. Even though I had to help you."

"Shut it! Don't say something patronizing! I could've dodged it myself!"

"Hmm... well, I don't mind letting you off with that. But since it seems like it'll be too tough with just Misaki, I'll help out."

"I keep telling you not to call me by name! I'll help out just because of that, too!"

In front of Yata and Fushimi, who were quarreling, the twins tilted their heads together.

"Are you done talking?"

Turning back to the twins, Yata and Fushimi kicked off together.

Noticing that Kamamoto was following him from behind, Totsuka turned around while running.

"Oh, you're coming with me?" In response to Totsuka's calm voice, Kamamoto exasperatedly went 'for goodness's sake!'.

"Yata-san said to go with Totsuka, since there's might be more blues or fighters

around!”

“I see, so you guys were worried about me. Thanks... but, from here on we’re going to be going in a dangerous direction on purpose, okay?”

“Okay!?”

Totsuka looked at the Strain boy who was running along with them half-pulled.

“Would the 'Mizuchi-san' you were about to mention earlier happen to be the one in charge here?”

In response to Totsuka’s question, the Strain boy who was still looking like he didn’t really get what was going on and blinking in surprise, nodded.

“Yeah, but...”

“Then, could you take us to where that Mizuchi-san is?”

“Totsuka-san!?” Kamamoto raised his voice wildly.

“Weren’t we going to run away!?”

“Well...”

“Don’t ‘well...’ me!”

Totsuka turned his smile towards Kamamoto, who was acting nervous.

“Kamamoto, would you go ahead and escape?”

“I don’t want to!” Before asking why, Kamamoto wrinkled his eyebrows and yelled. Looking at that, Totsuka let out a little laugh.

“...I think those twins have power rivaling FushimiYata. Considering their personalities... especially Yata’s personality, I can’t really think they’ll run away. But, if the fight lasts long, other fighters should come running. If that happened, then no matter how strong Fushimi and Yata are, it’s only a matter of time until they get caught.”

“So, you’re going to settle things directly with this place’s boss?”

Totsuka responded with a smile to Kamamoto’s shallow one.

"It’s not that big of a deal. We’re just going to see the other side’s attitude... so, even if they’re are aggressive, I don’t intend to fight back, so you don’t need to protect me, but... do you still not want to escape first?”

Kamamoto put on a sulky face.

“Is it Homura’s style to say oh okay and run away alone, leaving their comrades behind after being told that?”

Totsuka couldn’t help but blink several times and look at Kamamoto’s (who was running alongside him) face.

After about a couple of seconds, he couldn’t help but smile a bit and said,

“Sorry.”

Even as they talked, the three of them ran through hallways and up staircases all the way up to the top floor. The Strain boy who was leading them still looked like he was confused, but he didn’t seem like he was going to leave them and run away.

“Sorry for dragging you into this, too.”

When Totsuka spoke to him, the Strain boy looked like he got ahold of himself.

“Seriously! Why am I just obediently showing you guys the way!?”

“Ahaha, sorry, sorry. Come to ‘HOMRA’ the bar after you leave the Center. I’ll treat you to some alcohol or something.”

“I’m a minor!”

“Homra’ has good curry, too.”

“Somehow, this doesn’t feel worth it!”

While having a conversation that didn’t suit the situation, the Strain boy pointed at the next turn in the hallway.

“After that, there’s a room where the Center’s workers meet up. I don’t know whether Mizuchi-san is there or not, but...”

As the boy was saying that, Totsuka and company reached the corner.

Turned.

Suddenly, blue was right in front of his eyes.

Blue clothes.

Right as he registered that, Totsuka’s body went flying.

When he realized he had lightly had his arm grabbed and been tossed, he had already been thrown to the floor. Then he was immediately pulled back up, and had his knees forced to the ground while his arm was twisted around.

"Totsuka-san!" Kamamoto yelled.

Totsuka looked up while he was pinned down by his arm.

He could see a nervous-looking Kamamoto. Moving his neck, he could see a pair of feet wearing black leather shoes. He raised his eyes. Black slacks, a stainless white coat, a golden necklace that looked like a nametag, and finally, the deeply-chiseled face of a man in his thirties.

"I was informed that there were intruders." That man spoke with a smile. His speech was calm, but underneath that could be felt a freezing cold temperature.

"Who is in charge?"

"Technically me, I guess?"

Still wearing a soft expression, the man in the white coat said haughtily,

"Name yourself."

"Clansman of Suou Mikoto the third king, Totsuka Tatara."

Some slight scorn crossed the cheeks of the man who had been making a kind-looking expression.

”...aah, I know your name. I believe, even though you’re one of the first clansmen, you have unsuitably low abilities...”

"Haha, that’s not a very nice way of remembering me.”

After smiling wryly, Totsuka abruptly changed his expression. From his usual smile, to a blank face.

“Are you Mizuchi-san?”

The man narrowed his eyes. Because of his deeply chiseled features, a dark shadow fell on his eyes.

“Correct. I am this Center’s head, and the second King, Kokujoyouji Daikaku’s clansman, Mizuchi Koushi.”

After naming himself, Mizuchi glanced at the Strain boy. Totsuka, who was being held down, couldn’t see the boy, but from how his breathing was upset, Totsuka could tell he was very uneasy.

“We threatened that Strain over there into bringing us here.”

When Totsuka said that, Mizuchi gestured with his chin.

“Go.”

After a short, hesitating pause, Totsuka heard footsteps running away.

“So? If you have some sort of excuse, I’ll listen.”

“You know a kid named Kushina Anna, right?”

When asked directly, Mizuchi’s eyebrows raised a little.

“...what about her?”

“That kid, she can’t be called unrelated to us... last night, our members had a fight with some blue clansmen who seemed to be keeping watch on her.”

“I’ve heard the report. But, what of it? When returning a dangerous, young Strain to society temporarily, we put surveillance on them in case anything happens. Such preventative measures are a matter of course.”

“But, we found it suspicious.”

There was a momentary silence.

As if to say that’s his base expression, Mizuchi was constantly smiling faintly. Still looking that way, he looked behind Totsuka. Towards the person twisting

his arm, most likely.

“...the ones in charge of watching Kushina-kun yesterday were the Minato brothers, correct?”

“Yes.” Replied the person behind Totsuka. Because about the only thing that entered his head when he bumped into the other person at the corner was their blue clothes, he hadn’t been able to tell what sort they were, but judging by their voice, they weren’t someone young. Their voice had root, but it was dry and scratchy.

Mizuchi nodded after hearing the reply from the person holding Totsuka down.

“Yesterday, the ones who came in contact with your clansmen were, shall we say, ones who have some slight faults in their personality. Surely what made you suspicious was that... however, it’s extremely misguided to suspect the Center because of that. Just because the guards used were bad, it doesn’t make sense to suspect the work of the one hiring them, does it?”

The hand holding Totsuka down wavered very slightly. In his heart, he felt sympathetic. It was impossible to stay calm while being shamefully treated like another clan’s member’s security guards.

“...The red clan wishes to take that child.”

In response to what Totsuka said, Mizuchi froze.

“...what?”

“If I said that, what would you do?”

Mizuchi spat out a laugh.

“Ridiculous. She’s a difficult Strain. There is no way the red clan which has violence as its creed could protect her. I am the one who will protect her future.”

“But, if that child were to choose us, you wouldn’t have the right to stop it, would you?”

“She will not choose someone like you people.”

Totsuka closed his mouth momentarily at Mizuchi’s completely confident words.

“In any case, you people are criminals who invaded another king’s territory. Rather than that nonsense, shouldn’t you be trying to do something about yourselves?”

Behind him, Totsuka could hear Kamamoto swallow. His nervousness got across, so Totsuka, in contrast, loosened the strings on his feelings.

“Are you going to punish us?”

Mizuchi seemed to be lost for words for a moment at Totsuka’s soft question.

“...I probably should.”

Totsuka nodded slowly to that response.

“That’s fine.”

He turned to Mizuchi and smiled his usual smile.

“In order to punish another king’s clansman, proper formalities need to be observed... what I want to know is if you can do something like that openly without anything to hide.”

Mizuchi’s temple wrinkled a bit. Totsuka could hear Kamamoto rebukingly say “Totsuka-san” in a muffled voice. A short silence fell. After sighing slightly, Mizuchi looked at the man in blue who was holding Totsuka.

The next moment.

The guy in blue who was twisting Totsuka’s arm up from behind increased the strength in his hand. A tight sound came from inside Totsuka’s body. In response

to the acute pain running through his shoulder, Totsuka bit back the voice he almost let out. He ended up biting his lip, and the flavor of blood spread through his mouth.

“Totsuka-san!”

Totsuka used his free hand to stop Kamamoto, who was about to run over. His muscles kept creaking audibly. His shoulder was being pulled up and twisted in an unnatural direction. Unable to bear the force being put into it, the shoulder's bones and sinew were screaming. Despite the pain of nearly having his snapped, and despite sweating a bit from the feeling of dread, Totsuka endured the pain to look up at Mizuchi. Mizuchi watched emotionlessly, as though looking at data. Totsuka felt a chill seeing those eyes that had something like an ingratiating smile stuck to them.

In order to punish another king's clansman, proper formalities were needed. That was fact. However, it was possible to do something about that by just staying quiet (and anyway, Homura wouldn't do something that troublesome and would just pay their debts by their own rules). However, due to their nature, the golden clan had to be an example amongst the seven kings. They should have a responsibility to follow the rules more than anyone else. That was likely why they were silently causing pain to Totsuka while waiting for him to acknowledge his fault and beg for help.

Totsuka gave up on his shoulder and stayed quiet. A difficult to bear silence filled only with the sound of muscles creaking fell. The pain from his shoulder to his elbow began to numb.

If that silence had continued any longer, either the strength of Totsuka's bones or Kamamoto's ability to stand it probably would have reached their limit. But, the one who spoke first was Mizuchi.

"...I am the greatest and most powerful golden king's clansman. Of course I have nothing to hide. This center is also being properly managed under the observation of the 'Rabbits'."

Mizuchi lightly waved one hand at the man in blue who was about to destroy Totsuka's shoulder. The blue guy immediately let Totsuka free.

At the release of the pain that had been nearing its limit, Totsuka let out the breath he had been holding and held his shoulder. The acute pain became dull pain, and his shoulder began to throb in time with his heart.

"I don't know why you lot are feeling such suspicions for us, but we've done nothing to deserve it... however, dealing with a red clansman would cause some trouble for our king. I would not wish that for such a small incident as this."

Mizuchi looked down at Totsuka.

“Begone.”

After watching Mizuchi leave, Totsuka sighed. Kamamoto came running and kneeled down next to him.

“Totsuka-san! Please don’t be so reckless!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine, it’ll all work out somehow.”

“You were about to have your shoulder ruined, weren’t you!”

“More importantly, we need to fetch Yata and Fushimi...”

Looking up, Totsuka saw the man in blue who had been twisting his arm until just now send orders through an intercom.

“Minato Hayato, Minato Akito, cease fighting. Without engaging the intruders in battle anymore, show them out. I repeat...”

Still kneeling on the ground, Totsuka looked at the man in blue who had almost destroyed his shoulder.

Looking at him from the front for the first time, he appeared to be about forty.

Younger than Totsuka had assumed from his voice. When he had heard the man's voice from behind, he had imagined someone closer to an old man.

“...you're a blue clansman, right?”

The man in blue didn't reply, and only glanced at Totsuka. He had eyes that were difficult to read the emotion in, but that was different from Mizuchi's coldness—Totsuka could see that he was 'killing' his emotions. He could feel that the man had a wavering in his eyes that said he was biting down some kind of shameful feeling.

“Mind if I ask for your name?”

“...Shiotsu Gen.”

He had heard that name somewhere. It was the name of the current head of the blue clan, right?

“You're...”

“Be quiet.”

Shiotsu said this as though to throwing it away.

“I don’t intend to talk to you anymore. Go away. There won’t be a second time.

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Looking at Totsuka and company who had returned, Suou scowled.

"Ahaha..."

For starters, Totsuka laughed to try and change the subject. The four of them were beat up. Especially Yata and Fushimi, who had fought opponents with drawn swords, and had their clothes ripped with shallow cuts showing.

Suou gestured at Totsuka to come over with his finger. He grinned while going over. As soon as he was right next to Suou, the guy reached up and grabbed his right shoulder.

“Gah...!” With the dull pain he had been hiding turning into acute pain, Totsuka accidentally raised his voice. Suou sighed exasperatedly.

“...stop grinning. This isn’t broken, is it?”

“Eh, seriously?” Yata looked surprised and leaned forward. Compared to Yata and Fushimi who had cuts however shallow, Totsuka probably looked as though he weren’t hurt.

Totsuka waved his unharmed hand back and forth.

“No, no, the sinews didn’t snap or anything. It seems like the other guy was a professional in that, too. And more importantly, Yata and Saru-kun are looking like that. For now, head up and use the shower to wash off your cuts.”

Yata exchanged unsure looks with Fushimi. Fushimi didn’t look moved as usual, and looking as displeased as always he gestured with his chin.

“You go first.”

At Fushimi’s words, Yata glanced at Totsuka and Suou in an unsure way, saying “But, up there is...”. The bar’s second floor is Suou’s space. To Yata, who was holding back, Suou said “just use it” roughly.

“Right! Then, excuse me!” Yata bowed his head, and while giving Totsuka a worried look, he went up to the second floor.

“Anna-chan’s sleepin’ up there, so don’t be wakin’ her up!” Kusanagi said to Yata who was heading upstairs. Then, Kusanagi sighed and left the counter.

“Totsuka, Fushimi, sit down. I’ll give you first aid.” Getting out a kit, Kusanagi had Totsuka and Fushimi sit in chairs.

“Um... I’m sorry.” Kamamoto, who had come over with diffidence, suddenly bowed his head. Totsuka stared.

“Eh? For what?”

Kamamoto looked down ashamedly while mumbling towards his feet,

“Even though I was with you, I let you get hurt...”

Totsuka still didn’t get what he meant for several seconds, then finally understood, and made a really pathetic face while smiling wryly.

“No no no no... let’s not do this... at this point, it’s totally my fault since I can’t protect myself.”

“But...”

Unable to bear the situation, Totsuka looked exhausted.

Even though he’s part of “Homura”, he “cannot fight”.

Generally, Totsuka wasn’t the type to sweat the details, and usually he didn’t feel any sort of complex about it, but at times like this it was a bit bad for his heart.

“S'fine, s'fine. This guy's weak, but he's surprisin'ly tough, so don't worry about it.”

Kusanagi rescued the two of them. Totsuka nodded in agreement. Right when Fushimi was looking at Kamamoto and Totsuka coldly, suddenly a voice that was a bit too deep to pierce the air came from upstairs.

“Kyaaaaaaah!”

It was a male voice. More like, to say it directly, it was Yata's voice. A boy's voice that had long since gone through puberty shrieked “kyaaaaa” like a little girl.

Totsuka, to begin with, exchanged looks with Kamamoto who he was already facing. The only thing in their eyes was a pair of ?s.

After that, Totsuka looked at Fushimi who was sitting next to him. Fushimi was frowning in an unbearably questioning way, and looking up at the second floor.

“What was that...?”

Kusanagi stopped as he was about to open the first aid kit and, after all, exchanged questioning looks with Suou.

No one there felt like they needed to rush in, but it bothered them too much to leave it alone, so first Fushimi got up looking annoyed. Totsuka, Kamamoto, Kusanagi, and Suou followed. They went up the stairs and to the shower room.

What the five of them first saw was the back of a girl standing at the door to the changing room. Then, looking further, there was a completely naked Yata who was blushing and standing surrounded by steam. Apparently, like a crow taking a quick wash, he had hurriedly taken a shower and came back out. He was soaked and perhaps because his hair was sticking to his scalp, he looked like a dog who appeared to have shrunk due to being drenched in rain.

The group understood the situation.

“Wha... what!? What is going on!?” In a voice and speech patterns that were flipped over, Yata talked to Anna. Looking at Yata’s naked body with such a perfectly emotionless and unmoved expression that one might feel sorry for the guy, she said,

“I came to wash my hands.”

She had probably gone to the restroom or something. And then when she opened the door to the washroom, she had bumped into Yata.

“Wha... eehh!?”

But Yata still appeared to be confused, and didn't even think to hide the important bits, and just kind of waved his hands around uselessly like he was doing some sort of weird dance.

“...stop making it obvious that you're a huge virgin.”

As though to say he had just seen the most worthless thing in existence, Fushimi said this with a fed-up expression.

“Bu, but, a girl suddenly came in...!”

“This isn't a girl. It's just a brat.”

“It, it's bad for her upbringing!”

“Then hurry up and put away that thing that's bad for her upbringing.”

While Yata and Fushimi were talking, Totsuka used his unharmed hand to turn Anna around so her back faced Yata.

“Hah, I figured it was somethin' stupid, but that was even more stupid than I could've imagined.” Kusanagi sighed and left while rolling his shoulders. Suou said nothing, and acted as though the whole stupid thing hadn't even entered his

eyes.

“Yata-san...”

Kamamoto alone looked at Yata sympathetically and gently offered him a bathtowel.

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While Yata was getting Kamamoto to treat his injuries while he was already undressed and Fushimi was showering, Totsuka was getting his shoulder treated in the closed bar.

It seemed like his shoulder had some internal bleeding, so the area around it was swollen and feverish. Totsuka spoke with Anna while he was cooling his shoulder with a bag full of ice water. He had already reported what happened in the Center to Kusanagi over the phone, and he had no intention of talking about it in front of Anna.

“What were you doing during the day?”

“...sleeping.”

“A nap, huh-. That’s nice. Did you sleep well?”

“I saw a dream about Mikoto.”

“Eh, what’s with that. Since when did you two get so close!? And you’re calling him Mikoto!?”

“...Tatara.”

“Ugh, oh no. My heart fluttered just now. Even though Anna’s age is really outside my range.”

“Hey, don’t say that even as a joke in front of Honami-sensei. We’d be in trouble if she felt like Anna was in danger.”

“Well, sensei’s a bit too unassuming, so it’d be good for her to feel a bit more suspicious in a lot of ways, I think...”

To Totsuka’s questions, Anna replied without showing any stiffness like she had when they first met, and while she didn’t laugh at his and Kusanagi’s jokes, she seemed to be trusting of them.

He thought this wasn’t bad.

Totsuka had heard that something had happened between Suou and Anna during

the day from Kusanagi, but it seemed like that had actually gone well, so the walls she had built up between her and Suou, then the rest of the Homura members, were lowered quite a bit.

And also...

Totsuka glanced secretively at Suou.

Recently, he had been acting gloomy, but today he seemed to be feeling much better. Surely there was something between him and Anna that only they could share. Totsuka privately hoped that that would heal the both of them even slightly.

Kusanagi taped up Totsuka's shoulder, which was cooled off now thanks to the ice.

"Here, for now this'll do. But you'll be needin' to go to the hospital."

"Thanks. Nah, it'll be fine. It'll heal if I just leave it like this."

"You... it's not my fault if it goes weird."

After the treatment was over, when Totsuka was about to put his shirt on, Anna suddenly looked at his back.

“That.” She said as she continued to look.

“What’s that?”

Totsuka twisted his neck to look at his back as though to follow Anna’s gaze. It was hard to see himself. But, he immediately figured out what she was talking about.

On Totsuka’s back- on his left shoulderblade, he had Homura’s ‘Mark’. It was proof that he was the red king Suou Mikoto’s clansman.

“Misaki had one too.”

She probably saw it in the changing room. Totsuka smiled, and leaned down with his back to Anna so she could see the ‘Mark’ well.

“This is proof that we’re Suou Mikoto’s clansmen.”

Anna tilted her head, still looking expressionless.

“A clansman is someone who’s received power from a king, and is with the king.” Totsuka looked into Anna’s eyes, which were like glass balls.

“...do you want to be a clansman, too?”

As he said that, he got his head whacked from behind. A nice thump resounded, and Totsuka held his head.

“Oww-.”

“Don’t say something stupid.”

Suou was looking down on Totsuka in an exasperated way.

“Hurry up and put your clothes on.”

“Yeah, yeah.” As Totsuka put slipped his arms into the sleeve of his shirt, he quietly leaned towards Anna. As though to share secrets with her, who was as expressionless as usual, he whispered in her ear.

“I was being serious just now, okay?”

Anna looked up at him, then clammed up and averted her eyes.

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“I feel bad, after all.” Honami looked around the room in an unsure way.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. More importantly, I’m sorry it’s such a foul room.”

“Oh, no, it’s a simple and splendid room... but this is the room Suou-kun uses, isn’t it?”

“Don’t worry about it. There’re other open rooms, so this guy can just sleep there. Like the closet, for example.” Kusanagi said with a smile to Honami, who was tilting her head in an unsure way at the entrance to the room. Suou was smoking while leaning against the wall of the hallway, without complaining.

Honami, looking at the bed which was covered in fresh new sheets, turned around in Suou’s direction.

“Suou-kun, do you want to sleep here, too?” Honami asked that in a completely serious way.

Suou looked at he like he just swallowed a lemon.

“Are you an idiot? I’ll attack you.”

Saying it roughly, Suou went into the room that was turned into a closet across the hall. Kusanagi smiled wryly at Honami, who had her eyes wide.

“Please don’t tease the young guys~”

“Oh, come on, of course I wouldn’t do something like that.” Honami said with a smile. It wasn’t like she was playing innocent, it was just from her trust and the easiness that came from Anna being there as well. Either way, it was just a pain for Suou, though.

Ever since Honami had gotten off work and come to the bar, Anna was stuck right to her. Even now, they were holding hands, and Anna was halfway hidden behind Honami. While Anna appeared to have let her guard down towards the Homura guys a bit, it seemed as though she was able to relax most around Honami after all. Like this, she appeared to be a child fawning on her parent.

“Anyway, I’ll be leavin’ Totsuka here tonight, too, so if you need somethin’ or there’s a problem, go right ahead and ask him. Since Mikoto won’t pay attention to somethin’ like that.” When he said that clownishly, Honami smiled softly. Kusanagi was a bit unsettled by how that smile was not just kindly, but somehow kind of delicate.

“Really, thank you for everything. Even though I’m the teacher here, I’m just being helped by you guys.”

“...that’s not true.” As he replied, Kusanagi felt like he had seen Honami’s weak side for the first time.

To Kusanagi, ever since highschool Honami had been someone who, despite being fuzzy and hard to get ahold of, was an existence that never wavered. She could scold Suou, and she was airheaded and missing some screws, but she was profound and strong. That was the kind of person she was.

Even now, surely that hadn't changed.

But Suou thought that probably, this person was also uneasy. Her brother and his wife had died, and even though she was single and working, she was suddenly turned into the guardian of a seven year old girl with a difficult illness, so there was no way she wasn't feeling uneasy.

He thought that there wasn't a shred of untruth in the love Honami showed Anna. You could tell that from how Anna, who had the power to 'see', innocently trusted Honami this much. But, because of that love, she must have been concerned about her ability to raise and protect the girl.

“...Honami-sensei.” When Kusanagi spoke up, Honami hid the delicateness she had shown just now, and tilted her head, returning to her usual smile.

“If there's anythin' we can ever help with, let us know.”

Honami thanked him with a happy expression. Anna pulled on the hand she was holding.

“Ah, I’m sorry, Anna. Are you sleepy already?” Honami kneeled down to be on the same eye level as Anna. Anna looked into Honami’s eyes and opened her mouth.

“Read me a story?”

There wasn’t any change from her usual tone, but Anna gave off the sweet atmosphere of a child her age. Honami replied to her request with a smile. From a large bag, she pulled out several books. Anna chose one picture book from them. Honami took that, and moved to the bed. The two of them sat on the bed, with Anna on Honami’s knees so she could see the book well, and began to read.

Honami’s voice seemed to flow softly. Kusanagi suddenly remembered his highschool days. Honami was the English teacher. Her voice as she read off the English literature was nice, and even amongst students who didn’t like the subject Honami’s voice as she read was popular. He thought it was a songlike voice.

The contents of the picturebook seemed to be a cliché fantasy. A story where a princess gets stolen away by an evil king. Anna quietly leaned up against Honami, and listened with a childlike face. That face of hers wasn’t a doll-like one that created walls between her and other people, it was a young child’s natural

expression.

Watching the lady and the girl sitting together and reading, Kusanagi felt oddly guilty, like he was peeping, and quietly said 'goodnight' so as to not interrupt and left the room.

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In the bar after closing time, Kusanagi and Totsuka talked about today's happenings and their plans for now on. In front of Totsuka was a new original cocktail supposed to be put on sale. He had his thoughts on it questioned, but since he usually only said 'it's delicious', Kusanagi exasperatedly pointed out that that wasn't very helpful.

"While you guys were in the Center, we also investigated usin' an information broker, but, well, while there's lots of dark rumors, there's nothin' that goes beyond the level of a rumor."

"So, it's pretty much the same as us, huh-..."

Inside the counter, Kusanagi poured some whiskey into a glass for himself. As he slowly drank the pretty amber-colored stuff, he lightly leaned on the counter.

"Mizuchi Koushi. A golden clansman, and head of a Strain research facility..."

When Kusanagi said that in a whisper, Totsuka looked up while drinking his cocktail like soda.

“Did you find something out about him?”

“No, I just heard a simple profile. He became a golden clansman about ten years ago. Before that he was a doctor- a research doctor, apparently... do you know about the golden clan’s 'Installation’?”

'Installation'. It's referring to the ceremony where someone receives power from a king and becomes their clansman. In Homura they hardly ever use that term, and just call it a 'Test', but in their case they have the person take Suou's hand with his flames in it, and if they can do that and take the flames into their body they can become a clansman. In most cases, a red clansman would receive the power of flames, high physical abilities... and the 'Mark'.

“Gold... brings out 'Talent', right?”

“Yeah. I've been told that the golden 'Installation' brings out people's talents to their limit. They say that it was because of the efforts of the people who had had their 'Talent' brought out by the golden king after the war that we have Japan today.”

As he spoke, Kusanagi pulled out a cigarette and lit it with his lighter. It crackled

a bit, and lit up the end of the cigarette with a small red flame.

“...so, while the golden clan is huge, there’s only a small portion of members who have the ability to fight, and anyway there are lots of clansmen who only receive 'Talent' and don’t have any 'Powers' according to civilians.”

“Which is why they have people from Scepter 4 acting like security guards over there, I guess... what about the center’s head?”

“Apparently, he’s got powers. Something about healin’ and restoration. Well, I suppose it’s appropriate for someone who’s head of a facility for treatin’ patients involved in Strain incidents.”

“If you just heard that, it’d sound like a peaceful ability... you wouldn’t think someone whose 'Talent' unlocked by the golden king’s power was to heal others would be a bad person.” Said Totsuka as he swayed his glass and made noise with the ice. Kusanagi looked at his eyes.

“How was your impression of him?”

When asked, Totsuka replied with his usual smile.

“Bad, I guess.”

“That so. Then we’ll deal with him like that.”

“Is it okay to decide based on my first impression?”

He smiled wryly when Kusanagi nodded without hesitation.

“S’fine. Most of the people you say ‘this is no good’ about end up bein’ no good. Since you can get along normally with someone who’s just kinda hopeless.”

“Ehh-... even I have likes and dislikes when it comes to other people.”

“I’m sayin’ that if you dislike him, that’s all we need to know.”

That probably meant he was trusted. Totsuka smiled in a complicated way.

“But, I kinda want to talk to that other guy... the person from the blue clan.”

“The twins Yata and co fought with?”

“No, the one who almost did in my shoulder. Shiotsu Gen-san.”

“Ahh...” Kusanagi looked around as though trying to remember.

“That’s the name of the blue clan’s temporary commander.”

“Yeah.”

There was a space of several seconds between them.

“It must be tough, losin’ their king and then havin’ to sit in that seat, even as a temporary replacement.”

“Yeah... and on top of that, they were being treated like security guards by the golden clansman.”

Kusanagi sighed and looked down at the counter.

“It’s been ten years since the blue king passed away.”

Ten years without a king.

Thinking of those months and years, one couldn’t help but feel depressed.

Totsuka suddenly looked up as though he had finally realized something.

“Ah, come to think of it, even though the blue king passed away ten years ago, those twins were really young.”

“About how old were they?”

“Probably, just a bit older than me. I was nine when the Kagutsu crater happened.”

Meaning, the previous king had made children who were just past ten his clansmen.

“Hmm... but, you aren’t one to talk. Since you’ve been sayin’ stuff about taking Anna-chan into the red clan.”

“Ahaha. At the time, I just wanted to go ahead and see the other guy’s reaction... but, seriously, what do you think of that?”

“...do you wanna put Anna-chan in Homura?”

Being told that with a somewhat critical look, Totsuka smiled and scratched his cheek in a troubled way.

“Well, isn’t that one option?”

“You, do you wanna make a little kid like that go bad? I wouldn’t be able to face Honami-sensei.”

“But, if she were to join Homura, then not even a golden clansman would be able to touch her. She also wouldn’t be taken by the center while telling Honami-

sensei she's sick."

"Even if you say that, Anna-chan herself says she'll go back to the center. And anyway, we can't confidently say we have proof that we could take care of her better than a facility for educating Strains."

"But, it's true that that facility is suspicious, and..."

"Totsuka."

Kusanagi called Totsuka's name with a reproachful tone. Totsuka closed his mouth immediately.

"Puttin' all that aside, try sayin' what you really feel."

At Kusanagi's single sentence, Totsuka was at a loss for words, and just said he'd lost with a wry smile.

"...it's true that I'm worried about Anna-chan. But, it's also true that for my own selfish reasons, I think it'd be nice if that child were to stay with us."

It would be nice if that child were to stay at Suou's side. While saying it's for Anna's sake he was thinking that inwardly. Totsuka, being forced to realize how selfish he was, scratched his head uncomfortably.

Kusanagi sighed. He leisurely took a cigarette from his pocket and put it in his mouth.

“...if we get in a situation where we can decide that it’d be best for that child to become Mikoto’s clansman, I’ll talk to Mikoto about it. Until then, don’t say anything that’d lead the girl astray.”

“Got it.”

Totsuka nodded.

“Also.”

Kusanagi narrowed his eyes at Totsuka’s shoulder.

“Don’t be reckless. You said it yourself, but you generally can’t protect yourself, right?”

Having a nerve hit twice, Totsuka deepened his wry smile.

“Ah-.... yeah...” Saying that with a sigh, he faceplanted on the counter. Being apologized to by Kamamoto earlier still made his heart ache a little.

“Oh, that’s creepy. Isn’t not knowin’ how gloominess feels to the point that it’s

irritating your specialty?”

In response to Kusanagi’s exasperated voice, Totsuka twisted his mouth and looked up at Kusanagi while leaving one cheek on the counter.

“Even I have feelings-.”

“Stop that. If you feel down, somehow even I start feelin’ down.”

“Why would you?” Totsuka smiled wryly. Come to think of it, he recalled being told something like that in the past.

He raised his hand up as though to block out the shop’s light. With the light shining through it, the insides of his hand looked a bit red.

“...even though I’m supposed to have received powers from King like everyone else, I hardly have any use in fights.”

Totsuka not only had very little power, but his physical abilities were also almost no different than when he was a normal human. It was at a level that one could call him just a normal civilian who could use fire and heat for some little magic tricks.

“Honestly, you probably ain’t suited for Homura.”

Being told that frankly, Totsuka made a pathetic face.

“Kusanagi-san, that actually kind of seriously hurts my feelings.”

“Nah, I didn’t mean it in a bad way or anythin’.”

Kusanagi smiled and reached his hand out across the counter.

“That’s exactly why we need you, isn’t it?”

His hand stroked Totsuka’s head roughly. Totsuka smiled wryly and tried to lean away.

Back when they first met- back when Totsuka was a middle-schooler younger than Yata and company, he felt like he had been treated this way a lot. At the time, to him Kusanagi had looked like an adult, but when Homura was born, and lots of boys joined up, all of a sudden Totsuka was categorized as an ‘adult’ along with Kusanagi.

“Anyway, stay here tonight. I won’t be here tomorrow mornin’, so have the shop be closed.”

“...are you going out somewhere?”

“Pretty much.”

Kusanagi thinly exhaled some cigarette smoke, and smiled at Totsuka like he was plotting something.

“Totsuka, if you’re free tomorrow, take Anna-chan out somewhere and drag Mikoto along.”

“Eh?”

Kusanagi leaned out on the counter and whispered something into Totsuka’s ear.

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He saw a dream of drowning.

Suou opened his eyes when he thought 'I can't breathe'. Along with his awakening, his inability to breathe vanished, and his breath came back. It wasn't a dream worth getting nervous over, he only coolly thought that it was a nightmare different from the usual.

But, he got kind of nervous when he opened his eyes and saw what was in front of him.

“...hey.”

Suou had been sleeping in the room turned into a closet on the second floor. He had been asleep on a sofa that was ripped and had its cotton falling out, but for some reason, stretched out on his stomach now was Anna, who was supposed to be sleeping with Honami.

“Hey.... what are you doing?”

On top of that, Anna was shaking. Intensely. Suou frowned, grabbed her shoulder, and forced her to raise her head. Her face was white and her eyes were wide.

“...Anna.”

He tried calling her name. Her eyes waveringly looked in his direction. Suou wasn't sure what to do in the face of those relying eyes. Unable to think of what else to do to Anna, who looked like she might go into convulsions at any time, he pulled her to his chest as though hugging her. He could feel her unnaturally high pulse. But, that sped-up heartrate slowly calmed down to match his.

Her chilled body also began to warm up thanks to Suou's bodyheat and began to stop shivering.

“Did you see a scary dream or something?”

Anna nodded with her face still buried in Suou’s chest.

“Was it my fault?”

Anna had fallen because she 'Connected' with Suou. And on top of that, she was sharing his nightmares. He was concerned that it was because of that, but Anna nodded this time, her nose still stuck to him.

“Mikoto’s dreams are fine.”

“Then, what’s wrong?”

“...”

Anna fell silent. Suou felt even more helpless. He didn’t know how to comfort a child trembling after seeing a nightmare. He had hugged her to himself to begin with, but even if she calmed down like that, he wasn’t sure how to deal with it. Feeling troubled in a way he hadn’t for years, Suou stood up carrying Anna on his hip.

Since she went out of her way to come here, she probably didn’t want to be taken to Honami. While still carrying her like luggage, he went down the stairs.

It was dark, but the sky outside was beginning to light up, and he was able to see the inside of the bar. He found a lumpy white blanket on the sofa.

Suou went over to that, and put Anna down on it.

“Mmph!” The blanket groaned.

The white ball squirmed around, and Totsuka’s face came out.

“Eh, what...?”

Looking around while half-asleep, he discovered Anna on top of him and opened his eyes wide.

“Anna-chan? What’s up?”

“She was there when I woke up. Do something about it.”

After having it shoved off on him, Totsuka looked at Suou with a sleepy but exasperated expression, and then shifted around so he could sit up while being careful not to make Anna fall.

“You can’t sleep?”

Totsuka unsuspectingly asked while reaching out, and touched Anna's shoulder. Right then, his fingers jumped like they had touched something hot.

He breathed in sharply.

Totsuka's fingers, which he had pulled away from Anna while twisting his face a bit, had turned red as though they were burned. Suou wrinkled his brow. Looking at Totsuka's fingers, Anna's face turned white like earlier.

Totsuka reacted quickly. As if to tell her there was nothing to be worried about, he hugged Anna who was looking afraid.

“Ah-, it's okay, it's okay. Right now, that was probably something like a power overflow, but that's really common. Anna's just now wasn't anything big.”

A power overflow. Probably. However, that was still strange. It was possible for something like just now to happen when the red clansmen, who have flames inside their bodies, failed to control their powers. But Anna was supposed to have clairvoyant powers. So why was Totsuka 'Burned'?

Totsuka was apparently wondering the same thing. While still holding Anna, he made eye contact with Suou. After thinking for a while, he roused for his terminal, which was on the table. It showed on the screen that it was half past four in the morning. It was too early, but technically counted as morning.

“Anna-chan, wanna go back to sleep?”

She shook her head in reply.

“Then, it’s a bit early, but let’s just get up. What do you want for breakfast?”

Letting Anna down, Totsuka got up from the sofa with a smile. From behind Totsuka, who was interacting cheerfully with Anna, Suou looked at her quietly.

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She had seen a dream.

Maybe a nightmare.

But that wasn’t the sort of dream that showed one’s uneasiness, like Suou’s, it was a dream that showed something that had happened in reality as it was.

She thought she couldn’t be with Honami. She thought that if she were with that person, it would be okay. The person who had a very pretty red. The one person who held a color Anna could certainly feel the existence of. Anna quietly turned her eyes away.

...that’s no good. She couldn’t expect anything. She couldn’t reach her hand out.

Anna could 'See' a wide world. However, the world she could 'Touch' was very small.

She looked up at Totsuka, who was putting bread in the toaster. His fingers were long and thin. It was the fingers that had touched her a moment ago. Totsuka was acting like there wasn't anything wrong, but those fingers of his were red.

The people here were warm.

She couldn't let the people here touch what was inside of her.

Anna closed her eyes. Quietly, willfully, she closed up in the world inside of herself. So that what was inside her wouldn't hurt anyone.

So she wouldn't let her voice slip out.

Interval 2

Totsuka frowned at Kusanagi's difficult expression as he hung up the phone.

"Kusanagi-san?"

"...Totsuka, don't go wanderin' around in deserted places by yourself for a while." At Kusanagi's words, Totsuka's expression clouded.

"Did something happen again?"

"Some of the lower guys got attacked and were carried to the hospital. I'll go check on 'em later. Will you come too?"

"Yeah." Totsuka nodded and looked out the window.

It was raining outside. The sound of raindrops hitting the window resonated in the silent store. Perhaps due to this weather, there weren't many people walking down the street outside.

"...recently, the security's been bad, hasn't it."

"Yeah."

“There’s been more and more people who come to rely on Kusanagi-san, hasn’t there.”

“I wonder why they keep comin’ to me. Even though I can’t do anythin’.”

“Even though you say that, Kusanagi-san, you help them without throwing them out, don’t you. You’ve got information, and you’ve got a bunch of acquaintances, and-”

“-And I have Mikoto, yeah.”

As if to take Totsuka’s last words, Kusanagi smiled wryly. Now, Totsuka had become not the only one who called Suou “King”. There were people who, without a hint of teasing, innocently, single-mindedly called Suou King. To the delinquent boys living outside society on the streets, Shizume city, which was dangerous recently, was in a situation where they would constantly be beside danger.

They sought out someone who would protect them. And what reflected in their eyes was Suou, a man who had charisma known as strength. Now, regardless of Suou’s will, halfway naturally a team was being formed around him.

“King, huh...” Totsuka said to himself as he leaned on his elbow and watched the rain outside.

A person who could even become a king. The one who said that was Totsuka. He had seriously thought that when he said it, and he had followed the guy around even though it was obviously a pain to him. It wasn't that he thought this current situation was his fault. He wasn't that self-absorbed. But, even then, sometimes when he looked up at Suou who had been raised up into the seat of a king regardless of his own will, Totsuka felt an itch in his heart similar to guilt.

Suddenly, Kusanagi's hand lightly hit Totsuka on the head. When he turned to see, Kusanagi was smiling wryly, as if troubled.

"Don't feel down. If you're feelin' down, somehow even I feel bad."

"Sorry."

Even though they didn't recall calling themselves that, the team that had formed with Suou at its center had come to be known as Team Homura from the bar's name, "HOMRA". After the death of the bar's previous owner, Kusanagi's uncle, it had been left to Kusanagi, but now, more than a normal bar it had stronger meaning as the gathering place for Homura.

Homura was in a state where it was barely able to hold on to its form as a team using Suou, its king who had powerful centripetal force, Kusanagi's strategies, and Totsuka who was the grease who kept the broken up members together.

“At the moment, we should be extra-easy to aim for. Be careful.”

“Okay... what about King?”

When asked, Kusanagi made a face like he had bitten down on a lemon.

“I’ll try and warn him, but... I don’t think he’ll listen.” Totsuka laughed a little at Kusanagi, who mourned this in an over-the-top manner. Kusanagi put his finger on the tip of that smiling face’s nose.

“Totsuka. Smile irresponsibly. That’ll put me most at peace.”

Totsuka, doing as he was told, put on his usual smile, and said his usual phrase.

"It’s fine, it’s fine. It’ll all work out somehow.”

Kusanagi returned the smile and replied.

“Yeah.”

Chapter 3: A Rainbow Dream

Tokyo Legislative Bureau Forth Ward

Looking at that signboard, Kusanagi couldn't help but let out a scornful laugh. No matter how many times he saw it, he thought it was a weird name. The true identity of this building, which wore the skin of a proper government office, was the blue clan's- Scepter 4's headquarters.

Apparently, the name comes from how they claim up front to be dealing with 'special foreigners'. But that's just something like a metaphor. In actuality, they don't deal in people who are from different countries, but rather those with different abilities- in other words, people with supernatural powers.

Even amongst that, the type they dealt with the most were people who naturally gained abilities without joining a clan or receiving power from a king, Strains. Because there were cases where Strains, who had neither an organization they were affiliated with or a king to listen to, used their powers to commit crimes.

When Scepter 4 discovered an unregistered Strain, they were to take them into custody, and send them to centers for education and research under the golden king's jurisdiction. Because of that, from before the golden clan and the blue clan already had an intimate relationship. But...

“With one of 'em without a king, there's no way they'd be able to keep up an equal relationship.”

He didn't know what things had been like before. But, now at least, one couldn't see the blue clan as anything but a bunch of hired security guards being used by the golden clan.

“...it sure is tragic, ain't it. A subject who's lost their king.”

Saying that to himself, Kusanagi went through the forth ward's gate.

Kusanagi was led into a meeting room further in by a person from Scepter 4 in blue clothes, even as they gave him painfully suspicious looks. One way or another, Scepter 4 was supposed to be an organization that considered protecting the law amongst those with superhuman powers to be their principle. He figured it would probably be alright, but if there was someone here who thought they might as well take the opportunity to squash a red clan executive, would he be able to return in one piece, Kusanagi thought to himself half whimsically. He supposed he'd be completely outnumbered, so it might be difficult. Sitting on the meeting room's old sofa, the amount of time he had to wait was about as long as it took to smoke one cigarette.

A heavy knocked filled the air, and then door opened. Putting his shortened

cigarette in the ash tray, Kusanagi stood up.

The person who appeared was a man who looked just over forty. One could figure that he was that old from his face, but from his blank expression that went beyond tiredness, and the way he moved as though even taking a single step was tiresome, one would think he were someone older, like an old man. His formal uniform also seemed to be neglected and worn-out.

“...So you’re that guy? The red clan’s adviser, Kusanagi Izumo.” Said the main in a heavy, weary-sounding tone. Kusanagi smiled.

“Well, I’m not somethin’ as big and important as an adviser... you’re Scepter 4’s deputy commander, Shiotsu Gen-san, correct?”

In response to Kusanagi’s words, for some reason Shiotsu spat out a 'ha!' and smiled scornfully.

“Deputy commander, huh.”

“...am I wrong?”

“No, you’re not. Unfortunately, right now, there’s no one here who’s any better than this mediocre guy.” Saying that sullenly, the deputy commander sat down on the sofa across the low table. The old thing let out a stupid sounding 'swoosh’

as air escaped from it.

“Want some tea?”

“No.”

“Figured. You shouldn’t put anything from enemy territory into your mouth carelessly.”

“Oh, is this enemy territory for me?”

“Isn’t it?”

Sinking into the sofa while leaning sloppily on the back, Shiotsu glared up at Kusanagi. Kusanagi didn’t confirm or deny it.

“...today, I’ve come to apologize. Yesterday, our kids apparently caused you some trouble.”

Shiotsu didn’t try to respond immediately. He looked up at Kusanagi while his mouth stayed closed.

“It’s against the rules to trespass on another clan’s territory. It’s Scepter 4’s duty to punish those who deserve it.” Shiotsu said quietly, and as though he were

chewing on sand. Kusanagi nodded.

“I understand.”

“...but, there was a problem with my subordinates who attacked first without properly assessing the situation, apparently. And anyway, chief Mizuchi doesn't seem to want to make a fuss out of this case. There's no need for you to apologize to me. If that's all you wanted, leave.”

Kusanagi looked at Shiotsu's expression silently for a moment, then got his cigarette box out from his pocket.

“Mind if I smoke?”

“...I told you to leave.” But, even as he said that grudgingly, he gave permission by gesturing with his chin.

Kusanagi took a cigarette out from the box and put it in his mouth, then lit it with his lighter. A small flame lit up its end. Smoke rose.

“Yesterday, the ones who got into trouble with our kids were the twins from your place. It sounds like they're pretty young. Even younger than me, maybe?”

“So what?”

“Well. It’s just... it’s been ten years since the previous blue king passed away, hasn’t it? So I was just a bit interested, since if there were such young clansmen, then they must’ve been only children when they joined.”

Shiotsu clocked his tongue a little, and also got some cigarettes out from his pocket. When Kusanagi offered his lighter, Shiotsu paused for just a moment, before tiredly getting up from the back of the sofa and leaned out to use the fire.

“They were a special case.” Said Shiotsu as he held the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger and smoked it with a displeased face.

“Their parents were members of Scepter 4, you see. Then they died on duty during a certain incident. Those two were twelve at the time. Since they didn’t have anyone else to go to, Scepter 4 decided to take care of them as a group, but... those guys, they went to the previous king and asked to be made members of Scepter 4 themselves. Since they wanted to take over their parents’ dying will.” Only at the moment that he was speaking about the previous blue king did light appear in the tired-out deputy’s eyes. When the previous king was alive, he must have also been a member full of hope, one could feel from those eyes.

“And then...”

“He gave in. He made those two, who were still children, into clansmen. Of

course, he hadn't intended to let them work as actual members for a while. He probably just wanted to respect their wishes and raise them slowly."

'Probably just wanted to', meaning that didn't come to pass.

Kusanagi knew what happened after that. He knew, and he still asked.

"Then what?"

"...It was two weeks after those two became blue clansmen... that the Kagutsu incident happened."

The Kagutsu incident. The incident that happened ten years ago when Japan's geography changed. People who knew what had happened called the place that had been dug out in a circle the 'Kagutsu Crater' after the man who had been at the center of the explosion.

Kusanagi breathed slightly.

"If I recall correctly, the previous blue king passed away during the Kagutsu incident."

At Kusanagi's words, Shiotsu's slack body which had been sinking into the sofa tensed slightly. Wrinkling his brow, he answered shortly.

“Yeah.”

“It must have been such a shock for the brothers, who were children and had just become blue clansmen. Since right as they decided to take over their parents’ wills and decided on which back they should follow, it vanished.”

Shiotsu glared up at Kusanagi.

“...You’re not being sympathetic.”

“No, I’m not.”

“What are you trying to say?”

Kusanagi smiled like he would at a customer in his bar, and said,

“What occurred ten years ago was really a tragedy, but I was wonderin’ what happened to the sense of justice you guys were surely holdin’ on to at first even then.”

Shiotsu didn’t change his sloppy posture. But, his eyes alone began to shine dangerously.

“...are you trying to provoke me?”

“I’m aware that I’m bein’ rude. However, from what I’ve heard, the brothers who got into trouble with our kids didn’t seem to care a whole lot about justice or anythin’.”

“Are you trying to gloss over what your comrades did?”

“What I’m tryin’ to say is,” Kusanagi raised his voice. He narrowed his eyes as he looked at Shiotsu.

“Can you guys vow to your own king that your actions are nothin’ to be ashamed of?”

The atmosphere in the room tensed. Kusanagi could clearly sense killing intent rise from the man who was sitting loosely in front of him.

Kusanagi focused on the cigarette still in his fingers. So that should the other guy get into ‘that mood’, he’d be able to respond right away. The shortened cigarette flame wavered slightly in response to Kusanagi’s thoughts.

“...you won’t respond right away?”

“We have no king anymore.”

Kusanagi breathed out slightly.

“That’s your answer, huh.”

Shiotsu smiled thinly, but his eyes still shone with the killing intent reflected within.

“Right now, no one here can vow to their king that they have nothing to be ashamed of... we’re just a group of cowards who couldn’t even be at their king’s side when Kagutsu happened.”

Kusanagi frowned slightly at the words that were spat out.

“It’s not cool to talk down on yourself like that.”

“Shut it.”

“You’re not cool, but you’re not really a bad guy, I guess.”

As he said that, Kusanagi shoved his shortened cigarette into the ashtray. The fire crackled and vanished. Standing up straight, he turned to look right into Shiotsu’s petulant eyes.

“I’ll take that as a warning to ‘not believe me’. You should know what we’re

feeling. Even then, you don't say one word of excuse... you don't intend to defend what you're protecting, and you don't think the work you're doing right now is what's right."

Shiotsu didn't reply, and only looked sullenly at Kusanagi. Kusanagi was smiling.

"You're tryin' to be shameless, but do you not wanna regain your honor? We've lost any intention of trusting chief Mizuchi, and if it comes to a fight over that girl, we plan to face it... would you still become our enemy if that happened?"

"That's our work." It was a deep voice with all expression deadened. Even the sulky atmosphere from earlier had vanished, and a wall that seemed to shut everything out had been born.

Kusanagi decided it was time to go.

"...excuse me. Even though I just came to apologize, I ended up startin' a long conversation."

Kusanagi bowed once and stood up. As he was walking to the door, Shiotsu's voice came.

"Not to mention us, I can't recommend making an enemy out of the golden

clan.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

“You.” Shiotsu’s voice rose for a moment. Kusanagi turned to look at him without thinking. His greying head could be seen from behind, still seated on the couch.

“...what do you think about the Kagutsu story?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you trying to act like it’s unrelated to you?”

Right then, Kusanagi shuddered slightly.

He inwardly clicked his tongue at the fact that he had.

“That your king, that Suou Mikoto is different from the previous red king, Kagutsu Genji... can you vow it?”

...He asked something unpleasant. Kusanagi made a complicated face somewhere between annoyance and a bitter smile. But, they had both asked something unpleasant. However, Kusanagi still didn’t feel the urge to talk self-

deprecatingly like Shiotsu had.

“He’s different, our king.”

Shiotsu went 'hmpf'.

“I hate red kings. Their nature as king is too dangerous... Suou Mikoto might also become a Kagutsu at any little provocation.”

“...by provocation, you mean?”

“Anything. A waver in his mentality, indulging in his power, strong interactions with another king... especially, killing another king.”

At the end of that sentence, Kusanagi suddenly remembered something he had heard before.

“The previous blue king passed away while trying to stop Kagutsu’s rampage, correct?”

“...yeah. In truth, he should’ve killed Kagutsu before he became like that. But, even if he had been able to, then the Crater’s name would’ve just changed from the Kagutsu Crater to... the Habari Crater. Our previous king was pulled along by Kagutsu before that, and his own Weismann value got messed up. If he had

killed Kagutsu, his own Sword of Damocles would've fallen."

The smell of tobacco filled the room. Kusanagi thought that it was a weirdly quiet place. Suddenly, he felt homesick for the noisiness of his bar.

"Regardless, should something happen to a king, another king is required in order to stop it. Now, there's no longer a blue king... do you think there's something you can do when your king crumbles?"

Kusanagi didn't reply. He excused himself in a flat voice and left the room.

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"On this day, I would like to visit an amusement park."

In response to Totsuka's announcement, Suou frowned.

Behind Totsuka, Anna was staring in his direction half hidden. Even though she was staring shamelessly right at him, the fact that she was doing it from behind Totsuka made it kind of annoying.

"On this day, I would like to visit an amusement park."

Perhaps because Suou didn't reply, Totsuka repeated himself.

“That so.” When Suou, unable to reply any other way, said this in a way that implied he didn’t care, Totsuka smiled.

“Good for you, Anna-chan! King didn’t say no!”

“Ah?”

“Then, let’s go! King, can you leave right away?”

Suou grabbed Totsuka’s face. Even though his cheeks were being squished and his face was getting twisted in a stupid way, Totsuka didn’t mind and kept smiling.

“Who. Said. He’d. Go with you?”

“Oh, come on, King, do you intend to betray an innocent young girl’s expectations?” Said Totsuka in a muffled voice.

Anna fixedly, fiiiixedly continued to stare at Suou’s face. In response to those expectant eyes, Suou let go of Totsuka and looked away uncomfortably.

“You see, Anna-chan’s never gone to an amusement park.”

“Is that so.”

“So, she’d like to try going.”

“Then go.”

Even when he said that in a fed-up way, the power of Anna’s silent gaze was strong. Those large eyes like glass spheres were single-mindedly directed at him. It appeared as though the smiling Totsuka believed Suou would lose to Anna’s eyes, and that was annoying too.

“Before,”

Anna opened her mouth softly.

“Dad and mom said they’d take me to the amusement park... but, we didn’t get to go.”

Anna’s parents had died in a traffic accident. Though, he didn’t know whether the reason they hadn’t been able to go was their deaths or not. Anna had merely said the truth, and hadn’t been trying to make Suou sympathetic or anything. But, if he refused now, Totsuka appeared to be prepared to go ‘you fiend!’ and call him names. And Anna, despite being expressionless, was still sending a gaze that was weirdly passionate in his direction.

This isn’t a good day, Suou thought as he inwardly clicked his tongue.

The group walked through a park filled with happy voices and pleasant music.

“Mikoto-san, Mikoto-san! Do you want to get on the jet coaster!?” Said an excited Yata as he turned around.

“Aah?” With a voice that was annoyed to the extreme, Suou glared bullets at Yata. Yata went 'I'm sorry!!' and bowed.

“King, that's not the face of someone visiting an amusement park!”

“You're the one who made me come.”

Totsuka let Suou's voice and glare pass through one ear and out the other with a smile. Beside Yata, Fushimi walked as he muttered 'why me, too'. It appeared that Kamamoto had completely opened up with Anna, and the two of them were eating crepes together. Anna's was strawberry, but Kamamoto's was a mix of chocolate and banana, and Kamamoto told her 'I'll eat the rest if you can't finish it' in a way that it was hard to tell whether he was being nice or just being a glutton.

“I haven't been to an amusement park since I was a kid!” To Yata, who was excitedly looking like he was having fun, Totsuka responded with a smile.

“It’s my first time, I guess?”

“Really? You haven’t gone a single time?”

“I didn’t really get a chance...”

In the end, nominally for the sake of taking Anna, five grown men were walking around an amusement park.

It was a surreal scene.

Suou, who had been walking furthest back, sat down heavily just when they were passing a smoking area bench.

"Hey, King-."

“Shut it, go play as much as you want."

Totsuka smiled wryly at Suou, who said that in an annoyed way while lighting a cigarette.

"Don’t go home before us, okay?" Totsuka said, pointing a finger at Suou. Then he took Anna and went towards the attractions. Yata kept looking back at Suou, but followed Totsuka and company.

Suou rested his arms on the back of the bench and looked up at the sky. It was a blue sky with hardly any clouds. The smoke from the cigarette in Suou's mouth wavered slightly as it rose. Come to think of it, he felt like it had been a really long time since he had looked up at the sky like this. Recently, he hadn't cared about the weather. Since he had spent a lot of time cut off from the outside world.

...since that brat came, he had kept being dragged out.

A doll-like girl with scarce expression. She accidentally stepped into what was inside him and passed out, and despite passing out she said 'Mikoto's dreams are fine.' with a face that really looked like she were fine.

"This is stupid." He said self-deprecatingly when he realized he was starting to care.

On a fine, clear day at the amusement park, passing families kept starting and glancing at the good-for-nothing looking man reclined on the bench.

This was just plain stupid.

Anna's favorite was spinning coffee cups to death.

She'd get into a red cup, and spin it around to the limits of Kamamoto's power.

After getting off, the guys were all groggy, but on top of her expressionless face, even though it was extremely hard to tell, her eyes were gleaming in glee.

Anna, who had only left the impression of being doll-like, was actually enjoying herself, it seemed. Even when riding the jet coaster, Anna didn't move a single eyelash and only had her eyes blaze. After riding aggressive rides one after another until almost sunset, they had Anna who was tired from playing rest while Yata and Kamamoto went to buy juice. When they came back, she was sitting beside the fountain. Spreading out the sleeves of her frilly clothes, which used lots of blue cloth, she looked like a doll someone had left behind with her hands quietly in her lap.

Totsuka, who was standing in front of Anna, wasn't smiling for once, and seemed to be paying attention to something around them.

"Totsuka-san?" When Yata said something to him, Totsuka looked like he was suddenly jolted out of his thoughts.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, sorry, thanks." Totsuka smiled and took the juice Yata handed him.

"Here ya go." Kamamoto gave Anna some blood orange juice. It's orange juice with a color like tomato juice.

“Huh, what about Saruhiko?” Yata looked around, since he couldn’t see his friend.

“He wasn’t with you guys?”

Apparently, he had gotten away at some point. Yata clicked his tongue in exasperation.

“That guy, he went off on his own, didn’t he.”

He had always worked at his own pace and didn’t try to match up with others ever since they had met, but it seemed like it had been getting worse recently.

“Yata and Saru-kun are also a strange combination, huh.” Totsuka said this, smiling around his juice’s straw.

“Are we?”

“Yeah. The fact that you’re mismatched is the interesting part, though. You’ve been friends since middle school, right?”

Yata noisily sipped his cola while remembering the time around when he met Fushimi.

"Ah, yeah, I guess he wasn't the type of person in my class I'd normally become friends with. But somehow... I guess you could say we both kinda felt irritated at nothing in particular, or felt frustrated..."

Remembering the melancholy that nothing could be done about from those days, yet not being able to explain it well, Yata suddenly raised his eyes while muttering. Totsuka had a soft expression on his face as he looked at Yata like he was watching over him.

At that expression of Totsuka's, Yata somehow started feeling uncomfortable.

When Totsuka was horsing around with them, he was weirdly childish, or just didn't make them feel like there was an age gap, but sometimes he'd make a face that would make one think he were more of an adult than their real age gap. Yata had just a little bit of trouble dealing with Totsuka in those moments.

"...what?" When he asked that with a petulant look, Totsuka went 'hm?' and tilted his head.

"You were making a weird face just now."

"Weird', that's mean... I just was wondering if you felt the same way now."

Now? Yata tilted his head, then immediately shook it.

“Since I joined Homura, not at all. Everyone messes around and laughs, and if something happens we just blow it away. If Mikoto-san is close by, then I don’t have any opening to feel frustrated, anyway.”

“I wonder if it’s the same for Saru-kun?”

In response to that unexpected question, Yata blinked once or twice.

“Eh?”

“I wonder if Saru-kun, who felt the same way as you, is also letting himself be saved by us?”

It was a question he’d never even thought of. It wasn’t something he had thought of, but he tried thinking about it, and came up with a simple answer.

“I dunno, but isn’t he?”

Being beside Suou, there wasn’t anyone who wouldn’t have their hearts moved and wouldn’t have their blood boil, Yata thought simply. Totsuka didn’t comment on Yata’s answer, just said ‘I see’, and then put on a face like he was looking somewhere distant again.

“Hey, Totsuka-san, hasn’t your head been above the clouds several times since earlier? What’s up?”

“Hm? No, it’s nothing... shall we get going soon?” Saying that with the same expression, Totsuka threw his empty cup into a trashcan.

“Anna-chan, Kamamoto, soon... wh, whoa!” Looking over in Anna and Kamamoto’s direction, Totsuka leaned back a bit. Yata also raised his voice in a 'haah?’.

“...what are you doing?” Asked Totsuka as he tilted his head.

Kamamoto was lying on his back on the side of the fountain, and Anna was curled up on that big, round stomach like a kitten.

“Welll, Anna-chan showed some interest in my stomach, so.”

“Why are you looking proud!?”

“Ah, do you wanna sit on it, too, Yata-san?”

“Of course I don’t!”

While Kamamoto, who looked like a lazy walrus, was going at it with Yata,

Totsuka smiled at Anna who was using that walrus's stomach as a bed.

“How is it? Kamamoto's stomach.”

“...soft.”

“Good for you-. What do you wanna do? Rest here for a little bit longer? Or go play again? It's already sunset, so if you're tired we could also go home soon...”

“...go play.” Said Anna as she got up from Kamamoto's stomach.

Apparently, Anna was really relaxing and having fun today. Totsuka began to discuss with her which ride to go on next while smiling. While watching that, Yata noticed that the back of her skirt was dirty. Probably, when she had sat on the fountain, something from that had gotten on her.

“Your butt's dirty.”

“Hey, Yata-saaaaan! There's got to be a different way to say that!”

Anna twisted her neck to look at the back of her skirt. Pursing her lips in a way that was slightly embarrassed, she patted her skirt over and over. However, the place she was thumping was off, and the sandy spot wasn't even half erased.

Oh, right, this kid can't see anything but red, Yata remembered. He wouldn't be able to see a grey stain on grey, either. Totsuka casually reached out and brushed it off instead. Yata started.

“Wha, why are you touching her behind!”

“Eh, that's how you saw it!”

“Yata-saan... look, now Anna-chan's gone and hid behind Totsuka-san.”

“Eh!? Why am I the one who seems like the lolicon here!?”

Yata turned red and glared at Totsuka and Kamamoto, before scowling and looking down at Anna.

“More importantly, why're you wearing blue clothes?”

If you can't see anything but red you ought to wear red, Yata thought simply. If you can't see the color of your clothes, then you can't see what's on them, can you. Anna looked up at Yata. In the face of the young girl's straightforward eyes, he wavered a bit.

“...I got them at the center.”

Yata frowned without thinking at the word 'center', which only held suspicion and negative feelings for him. Moving his gaze to Totsuka and Kamamoto, they were also making an odd face and looking at Anna.

“Was the person who gave them to you the chief?” When Totsuka asked that gently, Anna nodded.

“He said they were a present... Honami also said they were cute.” While saying that, Anna’s expression, which have been relaxing in a fun way until then, became stiff. Her expressions were lacking, so it was at a level where you wouldn’t notice if you weren’t paying a lot of attention, but perhaps because they had been together since earlier, Yata was able to notice the change.

'I see' went Totsuka in a light voice. Yata felt frustrated, like he had something stuck between his teeth, but Totsuka didn’t show even a hint of negative feelings.

“Well then, Anna-chan, what do you want to ride next? It’s about time for the park to close, so I guess the next one will be the last, but...”

“That.”

Anna pointed towards the sky without hesitation.

“I want to see the sunset from there.”

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In response to the atmosphere of the amusement park, which seemed to be forcing those in it to be bright and happy, Fushimi had felt such tiredness that it made him feel ill, and he found an opening to get away from Anna and company. It seemed to be about close to closing time, so the guests were beginning to head home. While he thought about whether it would be okay for him to just go home already, Fushimi found an empty bench and practically threw himself down on it.

As he looked up at the madder-red sky absentmindedly while his body felt tense, suddenly someone sat heavily down next to him. Looking over, Fushimi started. It was Suou. Ripping the seal off of a new box of cigarettes, he took one out and lit it. Shoot, Fushimi thought while fidgeting in response to feeling uncomfortable to the extreme. But, if he were to get up now, it'd be even more awkward.

“...what happened to those guys.” Suou said that in a way that implied he didn't care while not looking at Fushimi.

“They should be... resting somewhere, I think...” When Fushimi answered awkwardly, Suou went 'mm' in a way that still sounded like he didn't care.

Without any comment or complaint about how Fushimi had gone off on his own (not that he wanted to hear that from Suou, who had had zero intention of going along with this from the beginning), Suou just boredly blew some cigarette smoke.

A silence fell.

...this was awkward.

Fushimi tried to casually come up with an excuse to leave, while feeling irritated at the park's bright background music as if to take things out on it. Suou, without minding Fushimi's situation at all, and as if Fushimi wasn't there at all, just coolly leaned back on the bench alone.

"...Mikoto-san, it's surprising that you'd go along with something like this." When he opened his mouth desperately, Suou went 'hmp' and smiled in response.

"You too."

"...if it's an order from above, then it can't be helped, so." After he ended up talking back like a child, Fushimi clicked his tongue inwardly. Gone to an amusement park on an order. There wasn't anything more stupid. And anyway, it wasn't like Totsuka had given an order or anything. He had just smiled like usual

and said 'Saru-kun, you come too'. Not that he had let Fushimi get a word in, but. Fushimi thought he hated that part of that person.

“Fushimi.” Suou called while letting ash fall from his cigarette. Fushimi looked up and at Suou, who was sitting next to him.

“Have you noticed?”

“Eh?” What, he couldn't ask because his pride got in the way. As usual, Suou still wasn't looking in Fushimi's direction. Fushimi closed his mouth and paid attention to his surroundings. Narrowing his eyes behind his glasses, he fixedly paid attention to his surroundings- and realized with a start.

“Ah, King, Saru-kun.” At the same moment, a voice spoke to them. Looking over, he could see Totsuka and company coming down the road. Anna, letting her blue clothes flutter, ran over. She came up to the bench, then stopped short. In response to Anna, who was standing right at the edge of the space and looking fixedly up at Suou with a serious face, Suou made an oddly uncomfortable face.

Totsuka, who caught up, smiled and looked at Suou.

“Come with us for the last one, at least.”

It was close to closing time. If they planned to continue playing, then this would

probably be the last one. When Suou got up looking like it was a pain, Yata went over with a face like a dog wagging its tail. Feeling irritated by that, Fushimi clicked his tongue a little and stood up. Grabbing Yata's collar, he dragged him.

“Whoa, what, Saru!”

“C'mere for a sec.”

When Fushimi dragged Yata away from the others, Totsuka tilted his head and looked at them.

“What's wrong?”

“Don't 'what's wrong' me.”

Fushimi turned his face halfway to glare at Totsuka. Totsuka smiled to change the subject as if saying 'you figured it out, huh'. Kamamoto looked like he didn't get what was going on and looked back and forth between Suou and Fushimi in a troubled way, but in the end, as though to follow Yata who was being dragged away, he went with Fushimi and company.

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“Closed Today”. In front of the ferris wheel which had that sign on it, Anna's

shoulders fell a little.

Apparently, Anna had been quietly looking forward to seeing the sunset from the ferris wheel. Totsuka scratched his cheek in a troubled way because he hadn't been able to grant what Anna wanted even though she hardly ever said she wanted anything.

“Hmm, what should we do.”

“...it's okay. It's fine.” Anna reasonably shook her head. To that manner which made her seem like she was trying to swallow her disappointment, Totsuka looked around to try and find at least a place where one could see the sunset well.

Suou, who had been yawning boredly a little ways off, let out a little sigh. His arm picked up Anna and held her on his hip.

“King?”

When Totsuka tilted his head, Suou's other arm reached out and lifted him up like a rice sack.

“Wha, wai...”

And then Suou's legs kicked the ground.

Their bodies floated up. The scenery flowed down all at once like a waterfall. With sleek movements like a feline beast, hardly making any noise at all, Suou's body flew up into the air carrying Anna and Totsuka, and he landed on top of a gondola halfway up the ferris wheel. Right away, he jumped up again.

In not even two seconds, Totsuka and company were at the tallest point of the amusement part, the top of the ferris wheel. When Suou was just about to land, he carelessly threw Totsuka down onto the roof of the gondola.

"Owowow... whoa." Totsuka, who had landed on his behind on the roof, had Anna lowered onto him.

"-Ah... Anna-chan, are you okay?" Said Totsuka as he held Anna on his lap so there was no chance of her falling. Even Anna looked surprised at the sudden happening. Totsuka smiled wryly.

"Do it after you give us a warning. Look, Anna-chan's surprised."

After blinking several times with a surprised face, Anna slowly moved her large eyes.

High.

Even among all the large rides like jet coasters, this ferris wheel was especially high. Around it was nothing, and one could see far away. The trees that surrounded the amusement park, and the pack of buildings beyond it. The setting sun was about to sink beyond all that. The red sun was dying the town the same color. The sky was the color of melted crimson, and the ground was also filled with red light.

Anna fixedly gazed at that scenery. Anna, who was watching the sunset without moving, had her hair stroked by the wind.

"Totsuka."

Hearing his name and looking up, Totsuka saw that Suou was standing on top of the gondola with his hands in his pockets, and looking in a different direction from the sunset. Suou's slightly narrowed eyes were looking at various places in the park as though to confirm something.

"Is this why you brought me out?"

Totsuka understood what Suou was saying and smiled wryly.

"It was Kusanagi-san's idea, though."

“Seems like we’ve been followed all day.”

“Since King kept his distance, I thought they might move, but... it turns out the other guys were surprisingly cautious, too.”

Anna looked up at their conversation. Totsuka met her eyes and smiled, but he didn’t explain anything, and looked back at Suou.

“There’s a lot of them, isn’t there.”

“...yeah, if it was just you guys, then even if YataFushimi were here, you might’ve been beaten by numbers.”

“Yeah. That’s why I had King be our insurance. Sorry.”

Suou finally looked at Totsuka and Anna. His eyes met Anna’s.

“Those guys, they’re suspecting that I’ll turn this brat into my clansman, aren’t they.”

“Probably.”

When Totsuka nodded, Anna seemed disturbed. Her expression didn’t change much, but he could tell clearly that her eyes showed a troubled waver.

“Meaning they’ve got a reason why it’d be a problem if someone took this one.”

Suou took a step forward on top of the gondola’s roof. Right at the edge of the roof. He stood where the tips of his toes would be stepping on air.

“What are you going to do?”

“Scatter them. You were intending to make me do that anyway, right?”

When looked at in a scolding, exasperated way, Totsuka smiled wryly.

They could feel that the other side was hiding something in relation to Anna. It was surely becoming a seed of nervousness for them that Anna was currently amongst the red clansmen. If the other side was carried away by that nervousness and tried to go out of their way to retrieve Anna, they could unashamedly fight back.

They hadn’t gotten enough of an excuse to go that far, but just being surrounded by this amount of people was enough of an oddity. For Homura, it was a fine situation for them to pick a fight.

“You guys stay here.” When Suou said that and was about to jump down, Anna’s hand moved. She grabbed Suou’s sleeve.

“Mikoto.”

Her tone was no different from usual, and it was quiet and thin, but there was a deep uneasiness in it. Anna looked up at Suou and shook her head. He frowned.

“...it’ll be done right away.” Unusual for Suou, he said it like he was trying to lessen that unease, but Anna’s relying eyes didn’t change.

“Honami is...” Saying her aunt’s name, Anna closed her mouth again.

“Are you worried about her? Without you worrying, those guys won’t lay a hand on a civilian. There’s an agreement.” Even when Suou said that, Anna’s expression didn’t soften. Seeing that and understanding something, he clicked his tongue loudly.

Suou took Anna’s small hand, and in a way that implied he was having trouble controlling his strength (it looked like he was seriously unsure about how much strength to use in order to not destroy it), and made her let go. She looked up at him helplessly. Without saying anything more, Suou signaled at Totsuka just once with his eyes and jumped.

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Suou landed on the ground.

Due to his landing from a ridiculous height, the ground trembled. Straightening up, he looked around. It seemed as though while he was on top of the ferris wheel, closing time had come. There were no civilian guests around. Or perhaps the blues had evacuated them. Either way, it was convenient for Suou.

He closed his senses. Closing his normal senses as a human being, he opened something deeper. The world's atmosphere changed. He directly felt his power as a king, that he usually kept closed up within himself and did his best to not pay attention to.

Deep within his chest was the presence of a smoldering, magma-like flame. It smoldered and writhed, like it wanted to go wild on the outside even now. He pushed down a melting desire to loosen the bindings and let free the blames within his body. The flames in his chest let out a voice of objection as they were forced down. His temple ached. But, Suou smiled faintly.

His pupils opened, and from his body a torrent of light spilled out. As though called by Suou's power, far above his head the sky twisted, and a red luminous body appeared. That luminous body started off as nothing but a speck of red light. That shined dazzlingly, then explosively swelled. From that burst of intense light, a gigantic sword appeared.

...Sword of Damocles.

That was proof of a king, and it held the duty of disciplining the king.

“What, is no one going to show themselves?”

The blue clansmen who had followed Anna still hid themselves, and not a single one responded to Suou’s taunt. It was a matter of course. There were no humans who would come right out after having a king’s power shown to them. But, just their presence vividly came across. A waver in the atmosphere that was as though they were intensely disturbed, and not sure whether they should run or not.

Suou snorted once, and let loose a torrent of red power from his body. The earth shuddered with a rumble, and waves of red light spread out with him at the center.

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Anna had her mouth hanging open on top of the ferris wheel, and she stared up at the gigantic sword that had appeared in front of her eyes.

“It’s the Sword of Damocles.” Totsuka said. Anna opened her eyes wide, and continued to stare at the blade. Anna’s eyes sparkled red with the reflection of

Suou's sword's light.

“It's damaged.”

In response to Anna's words, Totsuka smiled bitterly. As she had said, Suou's Sword of Damocles was not taking a perfect form. The energy body in the shape of a sword was cracked in places.

The state of the Sword of Damocles was said to show the state of that king's 'Weismann Value'. A Weismann value was the stability of that king's power. Suou's Weismann value was constantly unstable.

“You see, King's always in a state like he's keeping a starving beast inside his own body, I think.” Totsuka said this as though whispering while he felt the heat from the Sword of Damocles on his skin.

“That beast is thrashing around because it wants to get out. It wants flesh and blood. But, King won't let it do that... the damage on that Sword of Damocles might be scars from that fight, I think.”

Anna looked from the sword to Totsuka. He smiled at her, and then looked down.

“Though even if I say something like that, someone like me can't understand.”

It's not something someone other than a king could possibly understand. Below, Suou had just let loose his red-colored power. A red, hot aura. That came up from Suou's body and spread out with fearsome force. It looked showy, but it had no attack power. But, for the blue clansmen surrounding him, it had a disturbing effect.

The blue clansmen, who had spent a long time since they lost their king, scattered and ran away when they touched a fragment of a king's power. The ones who had been hiding themselves appeared, some fell as though their knees had gone weak when swallowed up by Suou's red aura, and some ran from the aura as it pressed at them.

It was as though all the enemies had fled at a single snarl from Suou, who hadn't even attacked. Looking at that, Anna quietly said,

“Is becoming a king something painful?”

In response to Anna's question, Totsuka looked at her face.

“Anna-chan?”

With her usual expressionless face, like a soulless doll, Anna said,

“I’m going to become the blue king.”

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“We’re surrounded?”

In response to Fushimi’s words, Yata frowned. Quickly looking around as though to search the area for something’s presence, Yata clicked his tongue.

“The blues who are after that kid, huh.” Yata said with an annoyed face. Fushimi pulled his chin in slightly.

“Probably.”

“Seriously. I wonder if it’ll turn into a fight.” Kamamoto said this while rolling his arm like a warm-up exercise.

“Who knows. But, it’s probably for this that we got dragged all the way out here.”

When Fushimi said that without looking at Kamamoto, Yata clenched his fists.

“Alright! Let’s get it on!”

“Don’t rush.”

While looking over in an exasperated way, Fushimi got ready to move at any time. Probably, the reason why Totsuka had brought them was to be Anna's bodyguard while she was apart from Suou. Move away from Suou and show an opening, then hit back when they were attacked.

Fushimi clicked his tongue inwardly, thinking he didn't like that. If that was the case, then they should've said so from the beginning. Well, in the case of simple-minded Yata, there's no way he could hear that and then pretend there was nothing, but...

(Ah, and that, too.)

Figuring out Totsuka's thoughts, Fushimi snorted. Even though he had a plan, separate from that, he had probably been thinking of something sickeningly sweet like wanting to simply have Anna enjoy herself.

It was so stupid.

Fushimi felt more irritated than was necessary, and put his fingers to his temple. It was the next moment. Suddenly, his whole body trembled. He opened his eyes wide and stiffened. What had assaulted him was a powerful pressure close to instinct. It was a fear that directly went to his instincts, like he was being glared at by a huge beast at a close distance.

Right afterwards, in the sunset sky, light was born.

Along with red light, the sky twisted, and from inside came a luminous body shaped like a sword.

“The Sword of... Damocles...” Said Fushimi in a faint voice. At the same time, from beneath the sword, an immense energy was born. A light holding a fearsome energy became a red pillar reaching to the sky, and that became red waves of light that spread as though to lick all over the insides of the park.

A wave of red aura went in front of Fushimi’s eyes. He couldn’t move. He was swallowed up by the hot red light and fell to his knees. Before he had realized it, Fushimi was kneeling down on top of the asphalt. His body was shuddering slightly. The red wave of aura had already vanished. It had no attack power and was simple a manifestation. It was just a show-of. Even though he knew that...

Fushimi’s body, in contrast to those thoughts, was completely afraid. Suou had simply roared to scatter the annoying rats scampering around. Despite that, Fushimi was afraid of that roar along with the rats and couldn’t stand.

“Awe...some.” Said Yata in a heated voice, as he stood in shock.

“Awesome! Mikoto-san really is great! For Mikoto-san, that was just like

nothing, like he was just scaring them, right? Even then... even though it was just that..." Yata searched for words to use impatiently, with his cheeks red, as he grasped at his own chest.

"It, makes my soul shiver."

Fushimi, on his knees, looked up at Yata. In his head that had gotten very dull, he thought that oh, come to think of it, Yata is standing up properly. Even though he himself was so pathetically kneeling down, Yata was standing up with his eyes sparkling.

"You okay?" Kamamoto asked and offered a hand as though to pull him up. Fushimi felt an unbearable shame at that hand. Even though this fatty called Yata 'Yata-san' and respected him, he'd offer his hand from above to Fushimi who had joined Homura along with Yata.

Even though he was the one who had always pulled along Yata, who was stupid and simple-minded and always running around getting nowhere. Why was Yata able to stand now, while he was pathetically on his knees and getting a hand offered to him.

Fushimi ignored Kamamoto and got up himself.

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...I'm going to become the blue king.

In response to Anna's confession, Totsuka opened his eyes wide.

“What?”

After Suou's manifestation, the Sword of Damocles vanished. Now, beneath a sky that was only dyed red in the west by the nearly fallen sun, and in the east by the night's deep blue, Totsuka faced Anna.

Anna's blue skirt fluttered in the high place's wind. Blue. That was a color Anna didn't even know. At the moment, there was no blue king. That throne was open. And Strains were an existence called 'those who couldn't become a king'. But why would Anna wish for something like that?

“Why would you be something like a king?”

“...because I can see the 'Slate'.”

'Slate'. That was the thing that chose 'Kings'. It was an object surrounded by a veil of mystery that had been found in Dresden and then carried to Japan after the war.

The system which determines a king was still mostly unknown. But, if it were Anna's clairvoyant powers- powers that allowed her to 'See' all things, if she were able to directly access the 'Slate', then maybe it would not be impossible to become a king.

But.

“Is that what you want?”

Anna didn't reply. In Totsuka's mind, as though he were watching a film, he saw Suou until he became a king- as he became a king.

“...you can't do that, Anna-chan.” Totsuka slowly shook his head.

“If you don't want to, you shouldn't be something like a king.” The words said with Totsuka's own mouth quietly pricked at his chest. Anna looked fixedly at him. He looked straight back at those eyes, which seemed to see through everything.

With a thudding noise, the ferris wheel began to move. Looking, Yata, Fushimi, and Kamamoto were down at the bottom. It seemed like Kamamoto had moved the ferris wheel. Suou, who had scattered the blue clansmen, was leaning against the rails of the boarding area and smoking.

Sitting on top of the gondola's roof and holding Anna, within the slowly moving and lowering scenery, Totsuka opened his mouth.

“Anna-chan, that day, you tried to run away from home, didn't you? Didn't you want to escape?”

Meaning the time when Yata and Kamamoto had come in contact with the blue twins. Anna had tried to leave Honami's home alone, carrying luggage. Anna clammed up like she had been scolded.

“...I'm sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing? You were right. If you think you want to run, you should run.”

“I can't run.”

Anna shook her head. Her small body felt as though it were wrapped in conflict.

“Why?”

When he asked that gently, Anna fell into silence again. It was as though the Anna who surrounded herself with high walls and hadn't responded when spoken to the day they had met at the bar had returned. Totsuka remembered her

words from earlier when she had tried to hold Suou back. He slowly opened his mouth and asked,

"If you don't go back to the center, will something bad happen to Honami-sensei?"

Anna's eyes wavered.

"Anna-chan."

When he called her name a bit strongly, Anna looked up. Tightening her lips, she firmly looked at Totsuka's eyes and said,

"I'll protect Honami."

The young girl who was supposed to be protected said that with a face full of decision. Anna's small hands gripped her blue skirt.

"Today was fun."

Saying that, Anna very slightly, to the point that one might think they were mistaken, smiled.

"So, it's okay."

What do you mean by 'so'. What's 'okay'. Even if he wanted to ask, Anna's words were completely rejecting the hand Totsuka and company tried to offer her.

Until the gondola reached the bottom, Anna would no longer open her mouth no matter what Totsuka said.

When the gondola Totsuka and Anna were on reached the bottom, Kamamoto stopped the ferris wheel. Totsuka picked Anna up in one arm and handed her over to Kamamoto below. Kamamoto took her and lowered her to the ground as though she were precious.

When Totsuka jumped down from the roof, Suou was just on the phone. He was responding generically with stuff like 'yeah' and 'got it', then hung up.

“Kusanagi-san?”

When Totsuka asked, Suou pulled his chin in a little.

“It seems like she was just leaving, so I had him go ahead and take her into his protection just in case.”

There wasn't any indication, but he could tell they were talking about Honami.

“Was Honami-sensei okay?”

“Yeah.” As Suou said that, he looked at Anna, who was surrounded by Kamamoto and Yata. Anna was spoken to by Kamamoto and replied shortly. Between that, she looked in Suou’s direction. When their eyes met, Suou very slightly nodded. It was something too short to be called a signal, but Anna sighed as though relieved.

“...earlier, King asked if this is why I brought you out, right?”

Totsuka said in a stifled voice while looking in Anna’s direction. Suou raised one eyebrow slightly and looked to the side at Totsuka.

“Well, that’s certainly the case, but... but even if I didn’t have a plan, I would’ve dragged King along.”

Totsuka smiled looking at Suou, who looked questioning.

“Because Anna-chan had really wanted to play with King.”

“...why. It’s fine if you’re there, isn’t it.”

“I’m not enough.” Totsuka smiled and looked down at his own hand.

The scar from when he had touched Anna still vaguely remained on his fingers.

“That child likes strong people.”

“...what, is that supposed to mean.”

“It’s because you definitely won’t get hurt because of her.”

Totsuka thought that maybe, the reason why Anna was strongly attracted to Suou’s power at the same time as trying to avoid it, was because she felt like she wanted to rely on that strength. It looked like Anna had decided that she couldn’t depend on anyone. Forcing down the thought that she wanted to run away, she held a tragic determination.

...I’m going to become the blue king.

Totsuka made a serious face as he thought of Anna’s words from the top of the ferris wheel. In a small voice that wouldn’t reach her, he said,

“King. That child intends to become a king.”

Hearing the report, Shiotsu let out a breath.

“I see. You can stop now. It can’t be helped if the red king is hanging around.

But continue observation.... yeah, I'll let Mizuchi-san know." Hanging up the phone, Shiotsu sighed deeply.

It seemed as though there really was nothing but cowards. Thinking of his subordinates who had run away with their tails between their legs, Shiotsu smiled bitterly. Even as he thought he needed to contact Mizuchi, his body wouldn't move.

"Without the blue king, this is as far as Scepter 4 goes, isn't it?"

Remembering Mizuchi's voice when he had said that, Shiotsu's face twisted. That was a year ago now, wasn't it. He had suddenly been called by Mizuchi to the center and made to listen.

"...even so, do you seriously intend to make a child like that into the next blue king?"

In response to Shiotsu's scolding reply, Mizuchi deeped his smile. That smile was like a reversed side, he thought. All the time, anytime, Mizuchi never stopped smiling. Even when he was plotting something, had evil thoughts, or felt anger.

Most of the people who weren't deeply involved with Mizuchi thought he was a kindly doctor. But from Shiotsu's point of view, Mizuchi's smile was just creepy.

"One doesn't often get to see a Strain with such strong powers as hers... they say that the current colorless king, Miwa Ichigen, has the power of prediction, but if we were just to talk in terms of clairvoyant powers, she could even rival a king."

"...is that child's power prediction?"

"No. Her powers are not something so narrow. Her clairvoyancy allows her to 'See' all things, and to 'Synchronize' herself with them... so, what then do you think would happen, if her powers were to be directed at the 'Slate'?"

It was like a teacher was asking a student a question. Shiotsu didn't reply, and silently looked at Mizuchi.

"Using her powers, she 'Sees' and 'Synchronizes' with the slate. Does that not mean the crowning of a king? It is still a mystery how the slate chooses a king. However, when a king is chosen by the slate, they feel as though they are one with it, and they claim to feel the slate's will and memories. If that is the case, then rather than just waiting for the slate to choose a king, it would be possible to move and connect with the slate on our own, and we could take the throne ourselves. Don't you think so?"

Mizuchi's tone had a fever to it. Shiotsu looked at that with a chilled heart.

“...so, you’re saying you’re going to make a blue king with that method, and give it to us as a present?”

“That’s a stern tone you’re using. But, that’s exactly right. The blue clan, which has lost its king, has no future. If you lot want to survive as clansmen, there is no alternative but to obtain a new king, is there.”

“And for that, you’ll coerce a child?”

Mizuchi made his smile thicker again. Something like pity floated in the eyes he used to look at Shiotsu while smiling.

“You cannot achieve anything while being moved by emotion. It isn’t as though you think of the creatures turned into food and cry at every meal, do you? A rightful person would eat it all with gratitude. What you should do is not pity her, but be grateful to her when she becomes king and be loyal to her.”

Their talk completely failed to match up. And in any case, trying to talk reason with Mizuchi itself was nonsense. Not to mention what he’s doing to Anna, Shiotsu was also aware that Mizuchi was doing inhumane experiments on several Strains who had committed crimes. To Mizuchi, there was nothing that would have higher priority than his research on the slate.

Shiotsu killed his expression and asked one more thing.

“That dream of yours, Mizuchi-san, does it not go against the lord’s will?”

“...ahh, so you feel uneasy because I am performing the experiments on her so that the 'Rabbits' won't notice.” Mizuchi sarcastically raised just his eyebrow.

“Yes, as chief of this center, I have a responsibility to perform experiments on Strains based on humane methods. But that is just the principle. If I am able to get closer to the solving of the slate’s riddle, then the lord should also be glad... but, until then, I cannot allow the lord’s name to be damaged, can I? The lord knows nothing. It is also my duty to make that appearance.”

Shiotsu had nothing more to say. In either case, he could not object. Shiotsu and Mizuchi were both different clansmen... but they were not in an equal position. The remnants of the blue clan led by Shiotsu were now no more than something like handymen hired by Mizuchi.

He had felt the desire to throw everything away and retire countless times. What kept him from doing so for ten years was the blue power he had received from his king, and what little sense of responsibility that remained in him even after his king had died.

...Sense of responsibility?

At his own thoughts, Shiotsu ended up laughing. A life like residue, getting dragged into someone else's ambition. Being forced to do work that cornered a small child. Corner her, corner her, and finally make that child into their top in order to keep the skin of their necks attached.

Shiotsu laughed in his throat and went to the phone.

In order to report to Mizuchi that his subordinates had failed to retrieve Anna, and that they had pathetically scattered when threatened by the red king.

As he lifted up the phone, Shiotsu suddenly dreamed that a rightful king, not that pitiable child, would be born right at that moment. If that were to become reality, then Shiotsu and the others who had completely lost their cause would be immediately dealt with by the king.

Shiotsu wished with his dried-out heart that that fantasy would become reality.

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Apparently, Anna intended to become the blue king.

As he finished hearing that from Totsuka, Kusanagi sighed. Kusanagi, Suou, and the others were in Honami's school. The sun had gone down, and the nighttime school grounds were sunk down in a creepy darkness. Honami was apparently

working overtime, and was still working in the office. Anna was supposed to be reading a book beside her.

When Kusanagi had been contacted by Suou and ran to Honami's school, there was no presence of anything suspicious around her. While being suspicious of his surroundings, he went ahead and waited for and met up with Suou and the others, and then because Anna was lonely... they claimed, they pushed her off on Honami.

“By the way, is this really okay? If it's found out that people like us came into the school, would Honami-sensei get fired?” Said Totsuka with a smile that made it hard to tell whether he was worried or not. As he said that, he was sitting cheekily on someone's seat. Kusanagi was lightly sitting on the desk of Totsuka's seat. Suou was leaning at the window, while Yata, Fushimi, and Kamamoto were standing broken up within the classroom, and they were all grimacing.

“The blue king... huh.” Kusanagi whispered quietly.

“I wonder if at the center, Anna-chan is... being made into a test subject for the sake of pursuing the 'Slate'.”

He couldn't believe that Anna wanted to become a king of her own will.

Thinking of how Anna was often worried about Honami, it was natural to think that she was being made to cooperate with the experiments for Honami's safety. If that was the case, then it would stop being a problem that would simply be solved if they didn't give Anna back to the center.

"...We might have to make this into a big deal, I guess." Kusanagi sighed, got a cigarette out of his chest pocket, and put it in his mouth. As he was about to light it, he stopped himself. This was a school.

Putting his lighter away, Kusanagi fell into thought while moving the unlit cigarette in his mouth around.

"Weren't that kid's parents killed by the center?" Suddenly, Fushimi, who had been quiet until then, spoke up in a cold tone.

"Hey!"

Yata kicked back his chair and stood. Raising his eyebrows, he glared at Fushimi in a reproachful way. Fushimi glanced at Yata particularly coldly.

"Maybe that kid didn't want to go to the center at first. Her parents felt that the center was suspicious, and tried not to hand her over. That'd mean the center would lose a good test subject... so, they killed her parents who were in the way and made it look like an accident."

“Don’t say random things based off of your imagination!”

Fushimi went 'hmp' at Yata, who had stood up suddenly.

“...Kusanagi-san and everyone were thinking the same thing too, right?”

Yata quickly turned to look in Kusanagi’s direction. Kusanagi sighed lightly, and took the unlit cigarette out of his mouth.

“I’m thinkin’ the possibility isn’t low.”

At Kusanagi’s words, Yata looked shocked. Fushimi looked between Yata and Kusanagi with an uneasy face.

“Hasn’t that kid herself realized? Because there was a past case with her parents, she seriously thinks there might be a danger to her aunt... no.” It’s a bit different, Fushimi said as though talking to himself. Beyond his glasses, his cold eyes narrowed.

“Even if she’s noticed the possibility, she might be trying not to see it.”

Suddenly, Kusanagi felt like he might have heard a slight noise out in the hall. He frowned and got down from the desk he was on, going over to the door. He

stuck his head out the door, but there was nothing but a dark hall and no one was around.

“Kusanagi-san? Is something up?” Kamamoto said questioningly. Kusanagi shook his head.

“Nah. I just thought I heard somethin’.” Returning to the inside of the classroom and turning back around, Kusanagi’s eyes met Yata’s, whose fists were shaking.

“If... if what Saru said was true, then we can’t forgive that, can we!”

If Anna had vaguely come to realize the truth behind her parents’ deaths and was pretending not to see.

Kusanagi thought and his mood became heavy. To Anna, 'pretending not to see' was different from a normal person's. Because Anna 'Sees' without acceptance or denial. To look away from that would be nothing but denial of reality.

He tried to imagine how the world, how the truth reflected in Anna’s eyes... and stopped. Even if he thought about it, it wasn’t something Kusanagi could understand. It was the same as how he couldn’t truly understand how a king... how Suou saw the world, even if he thought about it.

(Ah-, this is no good. I’m draggin’ it along.)

Remembering what he had talked about with Shiotsu during the day, Kusanagi scratched his head.

“What’ll you do, Mikoto?”

Suou slowly looked up when addressed, while still leaning against the window.

“This is how things are. Like Totsuka said, makin’ Anna your clansman is one option too.”

Suou frowned in a complicated way.

“...I can’t make someone into a clansman if they’re not interested.”

“Want to try and convince her?”

When Totsuka tilted his head and said that, Suou’s face got even more complicated and he looked away.

“...it can’t hurt to not make a brat go bad, can it.”

Totsuka smiled wryly at those words that could also sound like they weren’t like Suou.

“I guess.”

As Suou looked out the window at the dark school grounds, he said 'and before that we might as well,'

“Crush it.”

To those words thrown out casually, Yata raised his clenched fist.

“That’s right! Let’s go, Mikoto-san! There’s nothing to do but crush that inhumane facility, right! They owe me, too!”

Watching Yata who was getting all excited, Kusanagi let out a long breath.

"For now, we can finish this talk when we get home... I'll go check on Honami-sensei and Anna-chan."

As his head hurt because he felt like this was getting to be a troublesome situation, Kusanagi went out into the dark hall. When he walked towards the office's light at the end of the hall, he heard footsteps following him in a hurry.

“Totsuka, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just thought I’d go too.” Smiling, Totsuka lined up beside Kusanagi.

“Kusanagi-san, you went to Scepter 4 today, didn’t you.” As he walked, Totsuka said this casually.

“Yeah.”

“Did something bad happen?”

Being asked that lightly, Kusanagi was at a loss for an answer momentarily. Stopping and looking to his side, Totsuka was watching him with a mysterious smile.

“It’s like, you’re a little tired, aren’t you.”

What a sharp-eyed guy, Kusanagi thought as he felt a complicated mix of being impressed and displeased.

“...not really. It wasn’t a real fun talk, so I just got a bit sentimental.”

“It must’ve been pretty big if it made Kusanagi-san sentimental.”

Being told that with a bright smile and teasing expression, he felt annoyed along with feeling a bit better. What a mysterious guy, Kusanagi thought rather late. He tried to start walking again, but his legs just wouldn’t move, so he opened his mouth while looking in the direction of the office.

“We can’t understand the world as Mikoto sees it.”

“Yeah.”

“We also can’t really understand the world as Anna-chan sees it, can we.”

“That’s true.”

“But... there might be just something between those two that they can share.”

“I think so, too.” Totsuka smiled transparently and nodded. Kusanagi felt like he could understand Totsuka’s feelings when he had wanted to bring Anna into Homura now.

They were holding down the things within them so that they wouldn’t spill out. That was what the two of them shared, most likely. There was no way to solve what those two were holding.

About the only thing they could do was offer momentary soothing, and continue to pull those two back from this side whenever they were almost swallowed up by what was inside.

Looking at Totsuka out of the corner of his eye, Kusanagi started walking again.

“I’m glad you’re here.”

“...what’s wrong, Kusanagi-san? Are you that seriously sentimental?”

“Shut it.”

When Kusanagi opened the office’s door, Honami was just getting ready to go home. She looked in Kusanagi and Totsuka’s direction while getting papers together and smiled.

“Ah, sorry to make you wait. I just finished my work. I can go ahead and leave...”

“Huh, Honami-sensei, what about Anna-chan?” Asked Totsuka, who had peeked into the office and realized that the small, doll-like form was nowhere to be seen. Right then, Honami’s smiling expression clouded uneasily.

“Eh? Anna hasn’t gone over there? She said she was going to go to Suou-kun and everyone, and left here just earlier...”

Blood drained from Kusanagi’s face. When he reflexively looked beside him, Totsuka had also paled.

Anna had come to the classroom where they were talking.

At that time, what had they been speaking about?

“I’ll go look.” Totsuka said as he swiftly moved away.

Kusanagi soothed Honami, who was worried, and said he’d go check the classroom, then rushed back to where Suou and the others were.

...Weren’t that kid’s parents killed by the center.

...I’m thinkin’ that possibility isn’t low.

...Even if she’s realized the possibility, she might be trying not to see it.

If that conversation had entered Anna’s ears... cursing their own uncarefulness, Kusanagi ran down the hall.

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She had known.

In truth, she had known.

Anna ran along the nighttime road.

It felt like her heart was going to overflow. The world Anna had kept closed up in her chest until then... the monochrome, unrealistic... no, the world with its realness killed, was threatening to overflow.

She couldn't do this.

Anna desperately tried to hold herself back, but her heart was shaken into bits, and when she tried to gather them up they'd overflow and fall.

“Anna.”

She remembered her mother's kind voice. The feeling of having her hair gently stroked. The warmth she felt when held. Soft laughter.

“Anna!”

Anna's father had called her name while picking her up all at once and putting her on his shoulders. She remembered the high view that was different from usual she had seen then.

Memories of a warm place that was lost, never to return, shook Anna from inside. Her body shook and wouldn't stop.

Her parents had died in a traffic accident. It had happened right after Anna acted

like she didn't want to go to the center and her parents had promised not to send her back.

...even if she's realized the possibility, she might be trying not to see it.

The words she had heard from inside the classroom had pierced her directly. Anna had been desperately trying to look away from the truth scattered in front of her eyes. Because if she were to accept the truth that /her parents had died because of her/, it seemed as though she would break.

In reality, Anna was about to break now. Something that had pooled inside her body overflowed.

Anna thought about Suou. The person who kept a pretty, red... and terribly savage beast inside his body. That person was the same as Anna. They both lived cut off from the rest of the world so they wouldn't let what was in them outside.

But Anna, right now, was unable to do that.

It was going to overflow.

It was going to mix.

She would feel it.

Anna's narrow world and the wide outside world were going to end up becoming one.

“...help me...”

Anna's voice melted into the night's darkness and vanished.

...the world overflowed.

Interval 3

Totsuka was impolitely sitting on the couch with his feet up on it and his arms around his knees as he silently listened to Kusanagi and Suou's argument.

Kusanagi's hand was grabbing Suou's collar, and he was shoving him up against the wall like he was trying to throw him against it. Suou didn't resist, and allowed himself to be forced between Kusanagi and the wall.

"You...!" Throwing away his usual atmosphere and widening his often drooping eyes, Kusanagi glared at Suou, and spat out his words like vomiting blood. But, immediately, he shut up and clenched his teeth.

At that moment, Suou was covered in wounds. He'd received first aid, but many of them weren't closed, and blood leaked out to stain the bandages red. But Suou's eyes, as if in contrast to his body's condition, were energetically- perhaps even dangerously, one might think- full of life. Like his soul alone was trying to run on ahead, leaving behind his physical body.

Totsuka didn't try to stop Kusanagi from grabbing Suou, who was in bad shape.

Totsuka also understood Kusanagi's feelings, so much it was painful.

“Do you wanna die, Mikoto?” At Kusanagi's expression, one he never usually wore which was a fierce look only a paper's breadth away from looking like he was about to cry, Suou smiled in a wry, troubled way.

That scene was opposite from how things normally were.

Normally, Suou would always push annoying things off on and act so whimsically towards his elder, Kusanagi, it was almost like he was being spoiled in a way. Right then, it was Kusanagi who wasn't able to control himself, and Suou was the one who was looking like he was watching over Kusanagi from some distant place. That also fanned Kusanagi's worrying.

“Not really, I don't intend to die.” Looking at Suou's face as he said that, Kusanagi grimaced and let go of Suou's collar.

“Kusanagi.” Suou called, but Kusanagi didn't reply, and only irritably turned away. Still smiling bitterly, like his throat was tight (Kusanagi probably thought that even the fact that he was making such a face felt ominous), and after looking

at Kusanagi's face, he lightly laid his hand on the guy's shoulder and left the bar.

Between Kusanagi and Totsuka, who were left alone in the empty bar, an awkward silence fell. While Kusanagi and Suou had been arguing, Totsuka had just sat there silently without opening his mouth or even looking over there. Even after Suou exited, Totsuka didn't move and wondered what he should do for a little bit. In the end, while still not looking at Kusanagi, he asked directly.

"...should I leave you alone?"

"No." Kusanagi also didn't look in Totsuka's direction, but he shook his head.

"Be there."

"Okay."

Totsuka nodded and closed his mouth again. Silently looking in different directions, they simply shared the same space.

Shizume City's security was getting worse every time one looked at it. Disputes became an everyday deal, and Suou fought as the head of the team that had sprung up. What they were afraid of was how Suou was getting absorbed in those disputes. That he wouldn't mind even if he were to lose his life during those disputes- not only that, but that they felt he was giving off a feeling as though he were charmed by the idea of burning up his life.

"You won't say it today, huh." Sighed Kusanagi. Totsuka raised his head and looked in Kusanagi's direction.

"That 'it'll all work out somehow'."

"...I felt like you'd get angry at me if I said it this time." When Totsuka said that, Kusanagi smiled wryly. Totsuka opened his mouth after reading that tired expression.

"...hey, Kusanagi-san. Do you know the legend of the red king?" Kusanagi frowned questioningly.

"Come to think of it, before you said Mikoto was "a person who'd become a king" or somethin', right... don't tell me you were talkin' about the red king."

"It's not like that. At that time I was more... I just vaguely thought 'this guy might become someone amazing'. I thought that I wanted to see what this person sees from close by." Thinking about it, he realized he had been a really nonsensical child. Suou, who had been followed around for such a ridiculous hunch, must have really been troubled.

But now, Suou was literally being called "King". And somewhere inside his heart, Totsuka believed there was "something above that".

"...it's that story about a king with inhuman powers, right. The symbol of power, the personification of flames. That in the past, there existed a man like that, and he became king of those who lived with violence and became a deterrent in the underworld."

"That's it. That person was called the red king. His powers were... it wouldn't be outrageous to say they could give birth to that crater."

Kusanagi gave an exasperated sigh.

“That’s just a legend, ain’t it. I mean, that crater's truth is still wrapped in mystery, and people say all kinda things about it, but still. Even in all that, the myth about the red king is still going way over the top.”

“King told me that too. He got all exasperated and asked if I was a kid.”

“You said it to Mikoto too...” Totsuka was given a look that said 'for goodness's sake', but he was serious.

Stupid, a myth like a fairy tale. That may be the case.

“But, if it were really possible for there to be something like a 'red king'... I don't think there's anyone as fitting for it as that person.” When Totsuka said that with eyes that looked straight off into the distance, Kusanagi put on a troubled expression.

It was right after this that Suou was chosen by the “Slate”.

Chapter 4: Monochrome Reality

There was a heavy atmosphere inside the bar.

“Is it really true that Anna-chan did it?”

Kamamoto looked at Kusanagi. Kusanagi nodded and said ‘probably’ while lighting his cigarette.

Last night, after Anna had vanished, there was an incident where several people at a nearby crossroad collapsed due to suffocation. After they had been carried to the hospital, they all said that they had been 'suddenly trapped inside water', apparently. Which meant that they had all seen the same illusion and passed out at the same time.

On top of that, in a place a few dozen meters away from that crossroad where there wasn't any fire, there was an incident where several people suffered heavy burns. They suddenly felt pain in their skin, and directly afterwards, their skin burned red as though from the inside, apparently. The victims of both incidents had been carried to the Nanakamado hospital and were being treated.

“This mornin’, a report came from Scepter 4’s deputy commander.” Said Kusanagi with a heavy sigh. He remembered and repeated the words Shiotsu had

gone out of his way to report over the phone.

“In accordance with the laws of administrating unnatural phenomenon, we have taken the Strain who caused danger to civilians, Kushina Anna, into our custody. Until it can be deemed that the risks have completely passed, we will hold her.”

Kusanagi looked up at the thin cigarette smoke that was rising towards the ceiling.

"This is apparently the duty of Scepter 4, which manages Strains... waitin' for the other guys to make a mistake ended up causin' us not be able to justify ourselves instead.”

It was two hours after Anna vanished that Honami was contacted by the center. Anna had been carried by an ambulance. She needed to be hospitalized immediately, and they couldn't let Honami see her. Hearing that, Honami had tried to rush to the center, but Kusanagi and the others stopped her. It was hard to think that the guys from the center would cause Honami any harm right now, but thinking of Anna's parents, they didn't know what could happen. They couldn't put her in danger.

“...I guess, surprisingly, that kid being a "highly dangerous Strain" might not have just been an excuse to lock her up, huh.“ Fushimi said that quietly, as he

was sitting and looking at his toes. The way he twisted his face in an unsatisfied way and how he wouldn't meet anyone's eyes made him seem sulky, but it seemed like he might have been surprisingly putting up a front, going by how one could occasionally tell that his eyes would waver in uneasy restlessness.

"But... I can't believe that Anna-chan would do something like that." Kamamoto said with a frown. He had gone out to look for Anna, so he had also seen people collapsed in the road being carried off in ambulances. It had been an unnatural scene, seeing people being carried off for burns in a place with no fire. He just couldn't imagine that quiet, little girl who seemed to just play with marbles doing it.

Totsuka brought his hand up in front of Kamamoto. On his fingers, a burn scar was still faintly remaining.

"This is a burn I got when I touched Anna-chan after she woke up from a bad dream. It's the result of her being unable to control her powers due to agitation from her nightmare... an overflow of her powers."

Totsuka lowered his hand and brought together the fingers that were still burnt.

"At that moment, I thought it was strange. Anna-chan's powers are clairvoyance. If that's the case, then why would I have been burned from an overflow of it, I

wondered.” He slowly moved his eyes as though remembering that time.

“But that was really clairvoyant powers getting out of control.”

”...what do you mean?“ Kamamoto tilted his head. Totsuka looked him in the eye.

"She sees all in the world, and feels it. She brings the outside world into her body. That's that kid's clairvoyant powers. But, in contrast, letting loose what's inside her... that's also, certainly, that kid's ability.”

“So basically.” Said Kusanagi, taking Totsuka's words.

“Memories of being burned, memories of drownin’. You mean they're inside that kid, and when she's disturbed mentally, they spill out through her clairvoyant powers.”

Kamamoto folded his thick arms and growled.

“Anna-chan, she's had such a bad burn, or been choked before...” Those were words that came from him simply feeling sorry for her. But, Totsuka and Kusanagi, who had felt that the truth was in a more tragic place, for just a moment exchanged looks as though they were trying to shove the role of saying something unpleasant back and forth before Kusanagi heavily opened his mouth.

“Probably, she didn’t just get burned or almost drown because of an accident... it’s just a theory, but I think she had it happen to her at the center.”

Kamamoto was at a loss for words.

A silence like mud fell.

Yata, who seemed like he’d be the one to stand right up first, was for some reason quiet today. Even as he leaned on the counter and had only his eyes gleaming, he didn’t raise his voice in anger and stayed quiet.

“...If Mizuchi seriously wanted to make Anna-chan make contact with the ‘Slate’, then that isn’t ordinary. He wouldn’t have been picky about the methods to draw out her power... if that kid’s powers would be strongly drawn out by pain and sufferin’, then-”

Without listening to the end, Suou moved. He moved his back from the wall he had been leaning on and took one step forward.

“I’ll crush it.”

Those roughly thrown out words had no eagerness, or visible anger. But at the king’s single sentence, everyone’s faces twisted tightly.

“Alright.” Kusanagi replied lightly.

Within the members who were giving off murderous spirit, Fushimi still had an unchangingly sulky face. Like that, he tried to casually leave the bar. Right then, Yata, who had been still and quiet until then, went about two steps after Fushimi and called out,

“Saruhiko!”

Fushimi stopped at the bar’s door and turned only half his face around towards Yata.

“It’s not your fault.”

Yata looked right at Fushimi. Fushimi fidgeted slightly as though surprised. Just for a moment, his eyes trembled, but he didn’t give a single word in reply and left the bar leaving behind only a click of his tongue.

The words that Anna had probably eavesdropped on- the words that had shaken Anna’s heart, and became the trigger for her powers running wild, were probably the ones that Fushimi had spat out.

“Totsuka.” Kusanagi quietly called Totsuka as usual for times like these, but

Totsuka shook his head.

“Saru-kun probably wouldn’t like my followup.”

Totsuka looked between the door that Fushimi had gone out of and the side of Yata’s face, as Yata glared in the door’s direction while drawing himself up to his full height.

“Saru-kun is okay... for now, at least.” Totsuka said quietly, with a complicated expression.

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When she heard the sound of a knock, Honami raised her head. Standing up from the bed she had slept in with Anna the day before yesterday, she went to the door. Before she got there, it opened from outside.

“Suou-kun.”

The one who appeared from the other side of the door was the room’s real master. Suou entered with his usual expression, and closed the door behind him. Honami, who had had the exit closed off to her by Suou’s back, looked right at his face as though glaring at him.

“...what are you planning. Doing something that’s like locking me up.”

Suou and company and definitely not allowed Honami be to alone when she had tried to go looking for Anna, who had vanished. They always had someone by her, and even when notification that Anna had been taken to the center came, they didn’t let Honami go there.

They had halfway forcibly taken Honami to the bar and locked her up in this room as though imprisoning her. Even if she had been told to rest, there was no way she could sleep. Honami had been thinking all night. There was no mistake that they knew something about Anna that she didn’t. They were trying to hide that from her while doing something.

“I’m Anna’s guardian.”

Suou’s eyes matched Honami’s. They were in a much higher position than hers as she stretched her back out to her full height. During highschool, she had scolded this problem child of a man countless times. But what was getting in her way right now was an adult man who you wouldn’t think had been the boy she was responsible for teaching just a few years ago. Even then, Honami didn’t waver. Before she was a person with no power, before she was even a teacher, Honami was the one who protected a single girl named Anna as her replacement parent.

“Hey, what do you guys know?”

“ ... ”

“Is there a secret to Anna that I don’t know?”

“ ... ”

“What are you guys trying to do with Anna?”

“ ... ”

Even if she asked repeatedly, Suou wouldn’t answer. Honami put a hand on her cheek and sighed deeply.

“If you don’t intend to answer, then fine. Suou-kun, get out of the way.”

Suou didn’t move. Looking away from Honami, who frowned as though in a bad mood, he sighed.

“...there was always nothing more oppressive than your trust, but... just this once, trust me.”

Suou looked up and at Honami.

“I’ll bring that brat back.”

“...what do you mean...?” When Honami let out that unsure voice, suddenly Suou’s atmosphere changed.

Until then, even if she heard that Suou was someone feared throughout Shizume city, to Honami he was nothing but an extension of that naughty boy. She felt as though nothing about his base nature had changed. She had only seen the face of his that was in the sunlight, the face where he was concerned with her, trusted by Kusanagi and Totsuka, was admired by kindly boys, and had charisma.

But right now, Honami felt an overwhelming pressure from Suou.

As though she had run across a large carnivore, as though if she moved a single step she might be devoured, she felt that kind of instinctual fear.

...why am I being afraid of Suou-kun.

Honami tried to force down the fear she felt in her body and smile. The next moment, she thought Suou’s eyes shone red. At the same time, some kind of immense invisible power flowed out from his body, and Honami felt as though it were pushing in her direction. It may have been something like pressure. But to Honami, it had a physical effect. When she was swallowed up by the power

coming from Suou, strength left her knees, and she fell to the floor.

In contrast to her will, she couldn't put any power into her legs. Her body shook. Her teeth rattled. Her body was completely ruled by fear towards Suou. Tears blurred her eyes. They were tears from fear, as well as from confusion at herself for feeling fear that made no sense towards someone she liked.

"Why..." When Honami whispered that, Suou's presence calmed. The pressure that had been crushing Honami vanished, and she let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. Suou smiled wryly in a troubled way, and looked down at Honami. She had never seen him make such a face until now.

"I'm a monster from your point of view." Suou said.

"Your niece, if I had to say one or the other, is a person leaning towards this side of things."

Honami's shoulders shook. Looking up at Suou so much her neck hurt, she desperately moved her still shaking tongue and asked.

"Are you calling Anna a monster?"

"There's people who'd call her that, probably."

Anna was certainly not a normal child. There were places where she would see things others couldn't, and her parents had been very worried, and she had actually been reported to have an illness in her brain.

But...

Honami suddenly looked up at Suou.

“Anna isn't sick?”

“She isn't.”

“Then, her being taken to the center...” Looking up at Suou, who was quiet, Honami slowly felt uneasiness run through her body.

“What happened to Anna? ...What is that center?”

“If you wanna know, ask that brat directly. For that sake, don't move right now.”

“Suou-kun!”

Suou's hand was lightly left on Honami's head. In response to this unexpected gesture, she looked up at him in surprise.

"What that brat's most worried about is your safety."

In reponse to Suou's words, Honami opened her eyes wide.

"For that brat's sake, don't leave here. I'll bring her back."

"Suou-kun." Honami called his name.

"What exactly are you?"

With a self-hating and somehow desperate smile, he said,

"A king, apparently."

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Anna was in a room at the very bottom of the center's underground.

Curling up in a ball in a chair, she closed her world up inside her body. Her world, which had spilled out, had hurt the people around her.

A flood of feeling.

Anna's pain, her suffering, like light reflecting off of shattered glass had scattered around, and it swallowed up innocent passerbys. Anna had run around, unable to hold in the overflow of her clairvoyance, spreading about her pain and

suffering until she lost consciousness. She didn't remember how she had come to be carried here. But when she came to her senses, she was in this room, which was so familiar it was sickening.

“Have you learned your lesson?” Said Mizuchi. The man wearing a white coat and smiling with no emotion in his eyes was standing on the other side of a table.

On top of the table was a spread map. On top of that, red marbles were scattered. Mizuchi slowly walked around the table to stand behind Anna. The one-person sofa she was sitting on was apparently a deep blue color. But she couldn't see that color.

To Anna, this room was buried in monochrome. Only the red marbles scattered across the table were the sole color she could see. She held her knees and looked up waveringly.

She remembered the pretty red 'that person' held. The red that had spilled out from that person's body. It, in one stroke, dyed and changed Anna's world, which had been sunk in monochrome.

Anna remembered what happened at the amusement park. When was the last time she had just spent time having fun without thinking about anything? There

had been a time before Anna started going to the center when her, her parents, and Honami who had come to play went on a picnic. With a lunch made by her mother, sitting on her father's shoulders, it was spring, and there were many flowers blooming.

Honami told her the names of each flower. There was a spot with lots of red anemones blooming, and Anna had gazed at that red flock of flowers without getting bored. On the way home, they promised to all go to an amusement park next time. Though, that promise would never be fulfilled, Anna would enter the center, and her parents would end up dying.

Apparently, in addition to being unable to see anything but red, Anna had exhibited strange behavior ever since she was little. There were times where she couldn't seem to tell the difference between her pain and other people's pain, and she seemed to be seeing hallucinations- though in truth, she was just seeing through things, or seeing the past and the future. Anna's parents were worried about her and took her to a hospital. After receiving multiple examinations, Anna was directed to this center. Her parents were told that she 'had a problem with her brain', while she was told that 'you have a special power'.

Anna herself didn't know how long she had had what Mizuchi called 'a special power'. Mizuchi had told Anna that, including her parents, normal people must not know of her powers. They were something to be hidden, and it would bring

danger upon anyone who found out. At that point, she hadn't been subjected to such experiments yet. But, to Anna, a life where she was torn apart from her parents, locked up, put through experiments she couldn't understand, and forced to use her powers was full of suffering. So, Anna,

"I don't want to go to the center anymore." Said this while clinging to her mother, during a temporary leave from the hospital. Her mother exchanged troubled looks with her father, and spoke gently while stroking her hair.

"But, Anna. It may be difficult to be hospitalized... but it's to make your sickness get better."

"It's not a sickness." Said Anna. She had gone and said it.

"The people at the center, they say I've got a power other people don't, and they only do weird experiments... I don't want to go there anymore." Anna said to her parents what she had been told she couldn't tell. Over fear towards Mizuchi's threats, her feelings of wanting to run away from them and her trust that her parents could do something about it had won.

Her parents talked together late into that night. The next morning, the two of them told Anna that she didn't have to go there anymore. It was Sunday. They left Anna to Honami and left in a car. They had most likely gone to the center to

negotiate about Anna direction. It was when they were returning from that that they were in their accident and died.

Anna had closed her eyes when she was told of her parents' deaths. She closed her eyes, which while they wouldn't even show the world's colors would show things she didn't even need to see, and she also closed her heart. She had tried to make the reality she didn't want to see into something that wasn't there, and closed the lid on it. She had turned her eyes away from that truth, despite having led her parents to their deaths.

...Coward.

"Have you learned your lesson?"

Mizuchi's voice fell from behind her. He was repeating what he said earlier.

"You're a dangerous person. Your current existence brings harm to those around you."

Anna listened to Mizuchi's words quietly. She no longer had a heart to be hurt by them. When her parents died, she closed her heart, erased her emotions, and became something like a doll. Even though she had become a doll, she had gone and ended up having something like fun, her closed heart had opened, and the world she had locked up had wavered so much it spilled out.

Anna closed her eyes, and once more, she put away her own heart and her own world deep in her body, and closed the door on it.

"Tell me one thing." Said Anna.

"Did you kill mom and dad?" She asked about the reality she had tried not to see. In the monochrome room, such a silence fell that she felt pressure on her ears. But that silence didn't continue long. Mizuchi let out a light sigh. It had no weight, and it even seemed to hold a shade of exasperation. Then, with a fake smile, Mizuchi said,

"Of course not." It was a tone that was so thinly veiled it didn't even try to hide the truth hidden beneath it. Anna remembered what Mizuchi had told her after her parents had died and she was to be sent to the center again.

"You have the caliber of a king. If you were to lean on a normal person, you'd do nothing but make them unhappy."

That was a threat to the safety of Honami, who had become Anna's guardian. It was blackmail to her, asking if she wanted to make her aunt end up like her parents. Even though she had been told things like that, she couldn't believe now that she had turned her eyes away from the truth of her parents' deaths.

“I won’t leave here anymore. So don’t do anything to Honami.” To Anna, who said this in a flat voice, Mizuchi took on a compassionate expression.

“You don’t need to have such a tragic determination. If you become able to control your powers, and if you manage to reach the 'Slate’- if you manage to become a king, there will no longer be any need for you to be locked up here. You should go out under the sun and rule openly.”

Mizuchi’s hand touched Anna’s hair.

"Right now, the throne among the 'Seven Kings’ that is open is the forth king, the blue king’s throne. Considering your color-blindness, in truth the red king’s throne would be most appropriate, but unfortunately that seat was recently filled. If you had come to this center a bit earlier-”

“Stop.” Anna said in a quiet voice, as though cutting it away.

“I should just become the blue king, right.”

In response to Anna’s reply, Mizuchi made a satisfied face. He moved away from her chair and left a hand on the table with the map and marbles.

“Now then, shall we begin.”

In response to those words, Anna moved her will to the marbles on the table.

In response to Anna's will, the marbles began to move. They rolled around on top of the map, gathering at one spot. The clicking noise of them bumping into each other filled the room. The place where the marbles had stopped was the place where the golden king ruled, the tower at the center of Nanakamado. The corners of Mizuchi's mouth curled into the shape of a smile.

"Now then, what do you see?"

Anna's back shivered. There was something she 'had to see' in this place on the map. She closed her eyes. Closing her actual sight, she opened her other eyes. Her mind floated up from her body. First, her will slipped in to the marbles on the table that were taking in her power- then into the subject the marbles were reacting to. Anna mind, apart from her body, leaped through space, and went to that place. To 'See' not with her eyes, but with all her mind.

What Anna first 'Saw' was a wide space opened right in the middle of a pack of buildings, and the mysterious building like a gigantic turret. Looking up at that, the top of it was a tall, tall building that pierced the sky. She entered it, and headed right for above. A heavy pressure wrapped her mind.

Anna's mind wavered in the face of the first strike since the time she had ended

up 'Connecting' with Suou. The contact with Suou's mind had shaken Anna fiercely, but it hadn't rejected her. In fact, once they had 'Connected' once, the inside of Suou's heart had even felt comfortable. But, this was different. What was wrapped around her was trying to throw her out.

This was the 'Slate's' will- and it was the presence of the golden king who guarded it. Anna, while somehow holding on to her nearly vanishing consciousness, directed her mind to what she sought. Her will shook, and she started to not be able to see anything. The space around her was filled with white light.

Right when she thought she was going to be thrown back just like that, she 'saw it'. A wide, hall-like room with a tall ceiling. It was dim, and the air had so much pressure it felt heavy like jelly. Deep in the room, a gaudy sliding door was there, and gave the wide space an unnatural splendor.

The floor was glass. Beneath that transparent floor, a large stone could be seen. A strangely delicate mark ran across the stone's rough surface, and something circular peeked out.

It was the Dresden slate.

It was the first time she had made it this far. Anna gazed at the 'Slate'. Looking

down at the thing that was as big as the bedroom in Honami's home, she quieted her heart. She felt that the 'Slate' was alive. It was pulsing. That pulse was so big, so heavy, so deep that it could make one feel as though they were the world itself's pulse.

Anna leaned her heart to those movements. Synchronizing it with her own pulse, she tried to become one with the 'Slate'. In response to Anna's contact, the 'Slate' shined. The mazelike patterns on the 'Slate's' surface had light run along them. Right then, something huge pressed against Anna's insides. Anna's head whited out. Many images and sounds gushed down at her, and Anna's senses went over their maximum capacity-

When Anna woke up, she was fallen on the floor. Apparently, she had lost consciousness and fallen from the sofa. Anna slowly got up. The marbles on top of the map had scattered in all directions and fallen on the floor.

"A failure, huh." Asked Mizuchi.

"...but, I touched the 'Slate'."

When Anna replied, the corners of Mizuchi's mouth curled up.

"I see. What remarkable progress."

Mizuchi kneeled on the ground and lifted up Anna's hair.

"As I thought, you become more sensitive as you accept more suffering."

Anna listened to Mizuchi's words without feeling moved.

"But, there's no time... since thanks to you interacting with the red clan, there's a possibility of things getting a bit troublesome."

In order to stiffen her body and not feel anything at those words, Anna turned her eyes away.

Fushimi was in a park near the bar.

On a small, roofed arbor's bench, Fushimi was sitting hunched over. After Yata had viewed that from a distance for a little while, he slowly stepped forward and approached Fushimi.

"Hey."

When Yata came closer and raised his hand lightly, Fushimi glanced at him. Making a face that was sulky, or perhaps bored, he met Yata's gaze for a moment before immediately looking away.

“...hey.”

Even then, he did at least reply, and softened his presence as though to allow Yata’s approach. Come to think of it, ever since they had met this guy had given off a strong aura that didn’t let people close. To the point that it seemed like there was a physical wall.

It was surprisingly easy to tell when Fushimi’s atmosphere was letting someone come closer. He could hear the lock on the small door in the walls surrounding Fushimi unlock with a small noise. It wasn’t like the door would open from the other side. It was just that it was as though it were giving off a small signal, like saying ‘if you wanna come in, fine’.

On that subject, he thought that since they had entered Homura he hadn’t taken time and talked with this guy anymore. Homura was rowdy, and unlike when they were together in middleschool, Yata hadn’t paid much attention to Fushimi. He didn’t know if it was because of that, but recently he felt as though the moments where he didn’t really get Fushimi had increased.

“...we’re gonna barge into the Center, they said.” Yata spoke as he sat down next to Fushimi, and Fushimi snorted.

“If we mess up, it might turn into war with the golden clan.”

“I say bring it on.”

“...do you get it?” From behind his glasses, Fushimi looked coldly at Yata’s face.

“If it really ended up facing off against the golden king, your precious Homura might get crushed.”

Those words hit a nerve, and Yata stood up without thinking.

"Saru, are you trying to say that Homura would lose to the goldens or something!?"

“The clan’s scale is different. If you think about it calmly, even an idiot can understand, right?”

He was about to yell in response to that mocking tone, but Yata squeezed his fists and shut his mouth. Fushimi raised an eyebrow at those unexpected actions.

“...why did you say it like 'your precious Homura'. You’re Homura too, aren’t you.”

Fushimi stiffened for just a moment, but immediately frowned and turned away.

"Saru..."

"Shut it." Fushimi said irritably, standing up.

"I just wanted to say it. Going by how things were when we infiltrated the Center, that place didn't seem to be trusted by the golden king. You were just acting all innocently excited, so I put a stop to it in advance." Saying that in a cold voice, Fushimi sighed once.

"...Mikoto-san isn't all-powerful or anything." It wasn't a mocking tone. Maybe because of that, even though they were words that should have annoyed Yata, he didn't get angry. It was just as though he felt like he was looking at something mysterious as he watched Fushimi.

"Saruhiko's going too, right. To crash the place." He said that in a tone like when they were in middleschool and he was extending an invitation to the arcade on the way home, and Fushimi widened his eyes slightly in surprise, then clicked his tongue quietly.

"I'll go."

"Don't be upset about that kid."

"...just for the record, I'm not upset about anything, and I'm not obligated to be

upset about anything either.”

“Wha, that kid got hurt because you said something thoughtless, you know!”

“Don’t say that right after you tell me not to be upset about it.”

“Guh... you really have a bad attitude!” Even while arguing and shoving Fushimi slightly, Yata felt just a bit at ease because it was like they had returned somewhat to how they used to be, even though they had been distant recently.

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Kusanagi and Totsuka faced each other over a map of the Center in the seats furthest back in the bar. Beside that, Suou was sitting on a sofa, and leaning back. The other members were noisily going in and out of the bar while getting ready for the attack by contacting each other, preparing things that could be used as weapons, and that sort of thing.

“We’ll also need to guard Honami-sensei. So we’d better leave a few guys here.” Said Kusanagi. Totsuka lightly folded his arms while looking over the map.

“Going by how things went when we infiltrated the Center, I think Anna-chan probably isn’t in one of the above ground floors. The place we got into was surprisingly open, so I’d think that the important Strains would all be put into the

underground parts.”

“Can’t tell how to get into the basement from just this map. I guess we’ll just have to directly /have someone tell us/, huh.” Kusanagi looked up from the map, and looked out of the corner of his narrowed eyes at the king who didn’t even try to participate in the planning session.

“Mikoto. This time, don’t you be doin’ anythin’ too crazy.” Without moving his body at all, Suou just used his eyes to glance at Kusanagi.

“This is a pretty dangerous bridge, after all. We’re pickin’ a fight with the golden king of all people, and there’ll be a hospital full of civilians right by us. We can’t afford to mess up.”

“Yeah.” Suou replied vaguely, in a way that made it hard to tell whether he was listening or not. Kusanagi sighed, took a box of cigarettes from his pocket, and put one in his mouth.

“For starters, we’ll open the way. So don’t use your power until it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Yeah.” Suou was lying back on the sofa and, as usual, only replied carelessly. Kusanagi looked at Totsuka.

“Totsuka.” Suou called over to him while sloppily sinking into the sofa.

“Yeah?”

“Come with me.” Totsuka’s eyes widened a little.

“My, my. I thought I’d be stuck in the stay home group. If King says so, of course I’ll go, but won’t I totally be in the way?”

“You being in the way won’t even count as a handicap for me.”

“Well, that’s true, but.” Why? When Totsuka looked at Suou questioningly, he went ‘hmpf’.

“That brat might run away if she sees my face. She’s gotten somewhat attached to you, right.” Looking at Suou who said that irritably, Totsuka smiled wryly.

“I don’t think that will be the case.”

“Anyway, I hate brats. You look after her.” Suou spat that out, then got up in the space of a breath and headed towards the door. He went out, saying only ‘let me know when the preparations are done’.

“...I guess he’s actually really holdin’ back.” Totsuka widened his eyes when

Kusanagi said that with a wry smile.

“We pretty much had to do somethin’ like half threaten Honami-sensei to hold her back, right? ...That guy’s actually pretty bad at stuff like that.”

“Yeah...” Totsuka also smiled wryly, and looked towards the bar’s door Suou had gone out of.

“Well, even if that guy hadn’t said it, I was plannin’ on makin’ you go with him anyway.” Totsuka tilted his head at Kusanagi’s words.

“You’re the stopper.” Kusanagi said this while spitting out some cigarette smoke and suddenly remembered what Totsuka had said before, while acting unusually down.

“...A while ago, you said you didn’t have any power, right.”

“Ah, yeah.”

“At that time, I said you weren’t suited for us, but. It’s actually a bit different. We need a ‘powerless one’, probably.” Totsuka blinked confusedly.

“We’re a breed of team where power is like our meanin’ for existence. And on top of that, we’ve got a bunch of guys together who let the blood rush to their

heads. Someone who, within that, won't let them drown in their power... who'll keep everyone together using a method that isn't forceful, is needed." Kusanagi pulled the ashtray over and dropped the cigarette's ash into it.

"The one who needs a stopper most is the king." Saying that with a bitter smile, Kusanagi remembered the time he went to Scepter 4 and spoke with Shiotsu.

(When your king crumbles, do you think there's anything you can do?)

The words that hit a sore spot returned to the front of his mind, and Kusanagi frowned shallowly.

There's nothing he could do. At the very most, they could tie him down so that wouldn't happen, that was their... especially this guy's role.

Kusanagi remembered the past. This guy, from before, had been good at deflecting Suou's annoyances. He'd take the spite out with a smile and make one feel like an idiot for being irritated. Come to think of it, the first time they'd met had been in a hospital. Totsuka, a middle schooler, had been hanging around Suou, and been carried to the hospital after being tortured by some people with grudges against Suou. Kusanagi, who had a lot of connections, was informed of this from a witness and went to the hospital with Suou.

Totsuka, despite being black and blue all over, smiled like he didn't care. Even

when asked who had done it, he just laughed and dodged the subject, and before they realized it he had made up with the attackers. He definitely hadn't allowed Suou to get angry for his sake.

And even after Suou became king, Totsuka continued to smile the same way. With a smile, he had distracted Suou who was almost taken in by the seduction of power... of destruction.

“Ever since before, you’ve really acted so free it’s annoyin’... if you’re not like that at least, that role would be tough.”

There’s no way that even this guy wouldn’t have any objections towards this. Even then, on top of swallowing all of his negative feelings, he could smile and say ‘it’ll all work out’... and he would end up making those who heard him think that it might really all work out... if not for that mysterious formidability, he wouldn’t be able to stand in that place.

“Kusanagi-san?” Totsuka tilted his head as he looked at Kusanagi.

“Sometimes, I’m jealous of that mentality of yours that makes me wonder if you’re missin’ some screws.”

“What’s with that, you’re not praising me, are you?”

“I’m not praisin’ you or anythin’. Anyway, you’re responsible for Mikoto.” Kusanagi passed this over as though lightly tossing something heavy, and looked back down at the map.

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Minato Hayato and Minato Akito were in the Center’s security room, facing Shiotsu.

“The red clan,”

“Is going to attack?” Hayato and Akito split up their sentence and at the same time tilted their heads. Feeling bitter, Shiotsu nodded.

“Probably. I’ve technically sent them a warning, but with that clan’s attitude, I doubt they’ll listen.”

That morning, Shiotsu had called the red clan’s advisor and told him about taking Anna. Kusanagi had listened to those words, but not said anything about giving up and standing down. Remembering that tricky young guy’s face, Shiotsu snorted.

"This has turned into a pain..." His real thoughts came out along with a gloomy sigh. At this point, everything was a pain and full of despair. In contrast to

Shiotsu's feelings, the twins had interest in their thin eyes.

“To think they'd try to lay a hand on the golden clan's territory.”

“They must not care for their lives.”

Shiotsu emotionlessly looked at the twins, who had let a bit of color rise to their masklike faces. These twins were skilled, but their personalities were unnaturally immature. Even though they would be twenty two this year, he felt as though they hadn't changed at the core at all from when they had just become blue clansmen at twelve.

...That's my fault, isn't it. The edges of Shiotsu's mouth curled upward self deprecatingly. After these twins lost their parents, and the previous king had turned them into clansmen, only two weeks had passed when the king passed away. After that, the one who had raised these twins was mainly Shiotsu. Though while we say raised, he hadn't actually done anything like instructing them. The money for their education had come from Scepter 4's treasury, they were given food and a place to sleep within the base, and he only gave them work to do.

Losing his king, Shiotsu had come to take in the remaining blue clan, and while dealing with the business that came despite his lack of motivation, he hadn't

shown hardly any interest in the twin boys. To be honest, Shiotsu didn't even know when their personalities had become twisted. By the time he had paid any attention, the twins who had innocently respected the previous king and wanted to be clansmen like their parents had become terribly childlike adults who used 'cause' as an excuse to gain pleasure from throwing their power around.

“Are those guys going to come to take that little girl back?”

“I wonder why Mizuchi-san is also so focused on that girl?”

Hayato and Akito spoke in turns. They didn't know that Mizuchi planned to turn Anna into the blue king, and they didn't know that for that sake she was being forced through inhumane experiments. Even if they had known, they surely wouldn't have been moved. If, by gaining a blue king their position could be improved, they may even be glad. And in addition to that, they didn't comprehend how dangerous their current situation was. They were simply excited like children because they had been given a chance to use their powers under the name of justice.

Shiotsu, while feeling these bitter thoughts, didn't have the willpower to scold them, or even to explain the danger to them.

“Gather our people and set a guard. Be prepared for a fight, and get ready to shut

out civilians.”

“Understood.” The twins answered in unison.

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Outside the bar, his comrades were armed and waiting.

“Don’t be causin’ trouble for the neighbors.” Kusanagi called out to them in a relaxed way. Passerbys saw the foul-tempered looking boys armed with baseball bats, steel pipes, and that sort of thing and dodged them with a startled look. There were even some people who changed which path they went down. Kusanagi went hmm and looked around, arms folded.

“I sure hope we don’t get reported to the police.” He looked at his comrades’ faces. The members who would be barging in were mostly gathered. But there was a face amongst them missing, and Kusanagi spoke to Totsuka who was talking to the others.

“Totsuka, hasn’t Fushimi come back yet?” Totsuka looked up, waved lightly to the guys he was talking to and walked over to Kusanagi.

“Yata went to check on Saru-kun. I think they’ll be here soon.”

“That so.” Kusanagi said while thinking of that twisted boy. Totsuka, whose job was to always help when something happened to their comrades, had said about Fushimi that ‘he’d hate my followup’ and not tried anything.

“I... wonder what’s up with him.”

“Fushimi... you’re always gettin’ along with new blood right away, but this time you’re havin’ a lot of trouble, aren’t you.”

“Saru-kun might be no good!” When Totsuka said that, Kusanagi looked incredibly exasperated.

“You... that was a really extreme way of rejection all of a sudden! Don’t surprise me like that!”

"Ah, sorry, sorry. It’s not like I meant that Saru-kun himself is hopeless or anything... it’s just, I think he’ll have trouble fitting in, is all.”

“Fitting in?”

“That kid’s interest... or maybe I should say his focus, he’s just clinging way too hard to one single thing.”

Kusanagi thought for a couple of seconds, then had a vague, troubled look on his

face.

”...for you, that’s a pretty roundabout way of sayin’ it.“

Totsuka smiled wryly, and narrowed his eyes as though looking far away.

"It’s not like I’m being roundabout, but... I feel like if he has something he can cling to that much, he’s fine just like that.”

“Hmm?” Kusanagi tilted his head, and Totsuka just changed his wry smile into his usual carefree smile while looking at Kusanagi.

“Well, putting that aside, Saru-kun is an interesting guy, so I want to be friendly with him to the extent that he won’t be annoyed!”

Kusanagi said 'what a troublesome guy' along with a sigh. Right then, speak of the devil, Yata came up the road with Fushimi. Totsuka welcomed with with a wave.

“Sorry for being late! Are we leaving already?” Yata asked breathlessly as he ran up. Kusanagi nodded.

“Yeah, now all we need is our boss-”

“Everyone’s here, huh.”

A deep voice resounded from behind them.

They turned around.

Suou was standing in a place slightly separated from the Homura group. Like a slender lion, despite being lightweight he was a man who gave off a heavy pressure. Red light overflowed from his body, like power bubbling over from inside.

Suou stepped forward and came closer. When his feet connected with the ground, sparks flew with a small crackle.

“Someone’s fired up.” Kusanagi said that teasingly, making Suou go 'hmph’.

All the members of Homura shut their mouths, and waited for Suou’s next move. The eyes watching him were glittering expectation, heat, pride towards Homura, and anger towards their enemy.

“Let’s go.”

Suou made a low announcement.

Homura replied with a shout.

Interval 4

Thump, his heart loudly sounded. Suou felt his own heartbeat trying to synchronize with something.

With what?

Suou felt a strange feeling, as though the barriers between him and the outside world were becoming blurry. The pain he he had felt, and the raw feeling of life that stung his skin as he was in the midst of life-or-death struggling began to vanish. Suddenly, like a jellyfish's corpse dissolving into the ocean, he felt as though his own world was melting away.

...King?

...Mikoto?

He heard Totsuka and Kusanagi calling him quizzically like they were far away. This isn't the time to not be paying attention. Right then, Suou and the other two

had been chased into a dead end. If they were to let their minds wander, likely the only thing waiting for them was death.

His brain was technically moving, thinking, and making decisions, but the senses he used to recognize the world weren't returning.

Have I gone crazy? His brain, which was moving somewhere dissociated from his will, coolly doubted it.

Thump, his heart resounded again. His heartbeat was linked. The same movement was being carved into it.

The same as what?

(The same as the "Slate")

Suou frowned at the response his own unconsciousness gave him. What's the "Slate"? When his mind which was somewhere other than his feelings thought that, the ground vanished from beneath Suou's feet.

Suou was floating in complete darkness. Like space, in all directions there was nothing but darkness.

I guess I kicked the bucket, Suou thought. Is this that ‘next world’ thing, or is it something like a dream you see before you die... something like a near-death experience, one of those he thought. His heart was strangely calm, and even in a situation where he could only think he had either died or was close to it, he mysteriously felt unconcerned.

Then, beneath Suou’s feet, a sloping rock appeared. On its top a strange, circular, mazelike pattern had been carved, and it was a flat rock that looked like it could be about six tons.

Thump. Suou’s heart beat. As though to move together with that beat, the “Slate’s” pattern shined.

Thump. Suou’s heart and the “Slate” beat the same rhythm.

They're synchronizing.

As it continued to beat, the "Slate's" pattern increasingly released more and more light. Strongly, harshly.

Thump, thump, thumpthumpthump.

When Suou's rhythm rose to its limit, suddenly, the pattern's light vanished. But right after that, the "Slate's" center shone strongly, and light flowed through the pattern like it was spilling out. Like vigorously pouring water into thin channels, red light shone as it ran across the top of the pattern.

That red light swallowed up Suou's body. Suou felt like his own body became one with the "Slate". Inside Suou's body, magma rose up. That's the only thing to describe it as, with its heat and intensity.

Suou's consciousness went white in the face of the hot, intense power flowing through his body as though burning it. Into that white consciousness, various information flowed in.

It was something that should be called the “Slate’s” memories. The “Slate’s” power, the “Slate’s” memories, the “Slate’s” will. As the “Slate” and Suou’s soul linked... Suou was chosen.

As Suou opened his eyes, the sky far above his head twisted. Light burst open, and from inside came a luminous body in the shape of a gigantic sword.

“Gah....!” At the mercy of the power thrashing about within him, Suou groaned. Directly after, power with red light spilled out, and spread. The red light overflowing from from Suou’s body became flame, and burnt his surroundings like licking at them. And yet, the intense fever within Suou wasn’t calmed, and it felt like it would devour and tear apart his body any moment. Power he couldn’t hold back caused cracks under Suou’s feet, and those cracks spread.

When he tried to hold back his power, he was assaulted by a fierce headache.

...it’s hard because you’re trying to hold it back, isn’t it.

Suddenly, he felt temptation. If he were to let loose the magma in this stomach,

wouldn't there be nothing so comfortable. It was a sweet invitation. When he was about to falter in the face of that sweetness, a call struck his ears.

“King!”

It was Totsuka's voice. For someone who's always laughing at his own pace, it was a pretty frantic voice. Suou clicked his tongue.

...Aah, whaddya mean by King. Because you went and used such a stupid nickname, now it's come to something like this.

Slowly, Suou's power converged. Leaving the red light leaking from his body as it was, Suou slowly turned around. Surrounding him, the asphalt had deep crevices, and the buildings around him were cooked and burnt, with smoldering flames. Within that, Totsuka and Kusanagi were standing in a daze. From what he could see, neither of them were particularly injured.

Suou let a desperate smile float up to his face.

“...Starting now, I’m going to say something that’s kinda stupid, 'kay?”

When he carelessly threw those words out with a wry smile, Kusanagi, still looking taken aback, managed to smile with just his lips.

"Nah.... this situation’s already pretty stupid, so..." Kusanagi pointed up at the sky above them.

“You’ve gotta sword above your head.”

Suou laughed under his breath at Kusanagi’s still hesitant but droll way of saying it.

“Is this... the red king...?” Of course, Kusanagi would also know the local legend of the red king. Suou had also heard it from Totsuka. He didn’t know how seriously Totsuka had taken that myth. But, if such a thing really exists maybe you could become it, Totsuka had said in a way that may or may not have been joking.

Suou thought for a little while about where to start explaining from the information he had received from the “Slate”, but in the end that got to be a pain and he stopped. Suou closed his eyes, made both of his hands into fists, and held them up.

He focused his will into both of those fists. Like how he had tied his soul to the “Slate” and received power, Suou birthed the flames tied to the magma-like power within him in both hands. Slowly, he opened those fists. The flame born in his palms wrapped around his entire hands. Kusanagi and Totsuka watched the scene with held breath. Suou lightly held those hands wrapped in flames out towards the two of them.

Putting on a cynical smile, without explaining anything, he said,

“What’ll you do? Wanna try taking my hand?”

In this situation where nothing made sense, the two of them didn’t hesitate. They were hardly indecisive.

The right hand and the left hand that held Suou's flames. Kusanagi took the right hand, and Totsuka took the left. Kusanagi gained a large power, and while Totsuka took flames into his body he hardly received any power at all. To Suou, Kusanagi would be a sword with reason, and Totsuka would become a chain to hold back Suou who would often be drawn in by his power. It isn't sure whether that was simply because of the difference in their dispositions, or because Suou's will and unconsciousness had something to do with it.

The red king, and two clansmen.

That was the very first shape of the red clan.

Chapter 5: The Red King

The hub of this country, Nanakamado.

A town with a balance between great buildings lined up and green planted in a way that was planned. A gang surrounded by red light walked through it. It was the third king, Suou Mikoto's red clan- Homura.

Leading at the front was a man like a lion.

Commuters in suits looked at them in a startled way and parted for them. But as they got closer to their destination, they stopped seeing those commuters. For Nanakamado to be so empty in broad daylight was rare... or really, it was an unnatural situation. Surely it was already known that Suou was bringing his clansmen to the Center. This was set up by the other side.

The golden clan who considered itself the administrators couldn't involve the society that had nothing to do with things like 'kings' or 'the slate'.

Suou and company stopped in front of a sterile white building. Inside a gate with a sign on it saying Nanakamado Scientific Research Center, some blue clansmen could be seen standing as though to protect the building behind them. Vassals who clothed themselves in blue uniforms, carried sabers, and had lost their king.

A barrier was put up around the building. Energy shining blue was woven into a wall like barbed wire. Across from the Center was a hospital with many civilians. Rather than to prevent Homura's entry, the barrier was probably more for the sake of protecting the hospital from the aftereffects of what would come if a fight started.

In response to the sight of Suou and company who had stopped in front of the gates, the blue clansmen protecting the front visibly tensed.

"S, stop!" From among the blue clansmen, one person spoke up. But, they were obviously wavering, and so was their voice. Homura had already completely stopped before being told. In front of the king and his army, which they were not able to stand against, it seemed as though they were completely nervous. Suou went 'hmp' and stepped into the Center.

"From here on is the golden clan's territory! Red king! This is against the agreement!" The blue from before desperately raised their voice, but it seemed to just go over Suou's head as he continued on in.

Without even looking at the hospital's entrance, he went towards the courtyard. Going by how there wasn't nearly enough people over there, the other side hadn't thought much of the possibility of Suou and company attacking head on

from the hospital side either.

They would barge directly into the hub of the Center- the research side.

The hospital side was mostly full of people being treated for being injured by those with abilities, or those with some kind of ailment (and if that ailment was unusual, they would research it at the same time). Those who had been harmed by Anna's powers last night were probably also being treated here. They would have their scars cleanly healed, and if necessary the 'Rabbits' would blur those memories. In addition, in the case that the Strains taken by the center had families, it would also become camouflage. Up until now, Honami should have also seen Anna at the hospital side when she came to visit.

Right now, they had no business with that 'front side'.

Suou and company walked towards the 'back side'.

The border between the 'front' and the 'back'. As they entered the yard, the blue clansmen were lined up.

At the very front of that were those blue twins. Yata clicked his tongue, dropped his skateboard to the ground, stepped on it, and as though to soothe his desire to fight that might explode any second he lightly knocked his bat against his own shoulders. Even in front of the red king, the twins didn't lose move their white

expressions.

“Red king, and his clansmen. This is your final warning.” Said one of the twins, black haired Minato Hayato.

“Even though you are a king, it won’t be forgiven for you to enter another clan’s territory without prior procedures. We request your departure.” Said the other twin, brown haired Minato Akito.

In response to the twin’s blunt warning, Suou glanced at them, then opened his mouth in an annoyed way.

“...We’re here to pick up one of us.”

“Are you talking about Kushina Anna?” Said Hayato. Suou didn’t answer, but that silence alone was enough of an answer. Hayato continued.

“She is a Strain who couldn’t control her own powers and harmed many people. This center has responsibility to take care of her and educate her.”

“You said she is one of yours, but Kushina Anna should not be a red clansman. It is not your place to do anything.” While raising their voices, the twin’s still spoke flatly. Yata was just a bit impressed. Even though they were creeps he wanted to beat up right away, he’d give them points just for how they didn’t

shrink away in front of Suou despite being grunts.

“Mikoto-san, can I?” Forcing down his impatient feelings, Yata looked up at Suou. The corners of Suou’s mouth turned up very slightly. With that one faint, yet fearless smile, the flames within Yata’s body swelled.

“Yeah.”

In response to Suou’s short approval, Yata glared at the twins with an aggressive, gleaming smile. His bat heated up, and was surrounded by flames.

“Let’s stop with the formalities and get this going!” At Yata’s words, filled with impatient heat, the twins snorted. Beside Yata, Fushimi drew his knives intended for melee combat. The twins put their hands to their saber sheathes at the same time. Their thin eyes watched Homura, and they raised their voices together.

“All members, draw your swords!”

The blue clansmen behind the twins drew their swords at once. The sound of metal against sheathe resounded through the courtyard.

Suou raised a low voice.

“Burn it up.”

In response to that, the first one to raise his fist towards the sky was Yata. Only a hair's breadth later, the rest of the reds did the same.

“No blood! No bone! No ash!”

Homura's voices were together as one. Using that as a signal to begin the battle, Yata kicked the ground. His skateboard flew. Higher, higher. The board's wheels were surrounded by red light, the power he had received from Suou which was proof of Homura, and those flames left deep marks. The mark of Homura drawn on the bottom of the board shone with the sun behind it over the blue clansmen's heads.

Yata dove right into the center of the blue clan's lines as though to cut into it. The one who met him was one of the twins, Minato Hayato. Hayato's blade stopped Yata's board. Yata had expected that. He fearless turned up the corner of his mouth, twisted around in the air, and looked quickly across the blue guys.

From what Yata could tell, the ones who could /do it/ among these blue guys were just the twins. If that was the case, then it was his job to take on these guys.

As though to get used to the feeling of his bat, Yata waved it once, then swung it. Red power moved from his hand to the bat and shined. Hayato dodged the swung bat and Yata blocked the power swung by Hayato with his bat. Behind

him, Yata felt a different murderous intent. Since this was the third time, he didn't panic even slightly. He didn't so much as turn around, and just yelled.

“Saruhiko!”

From behind, he could hear the sound of metal connecting, along with someone clicking their tongue. Fushimi stopped the other twin, Akito's saber with his knife. With an annoyed look on his face, Fushimi clicked his tongue again and slid his knife along his opponent's blade. The red and blue auras mixed and caused great friction as they repelled each other. Fushimi backed up from the force and hit Yata's back. At that point, he clicked his tongue a third time.

“...Don't order me around, Misaki.”

“I keep telling you not to use my given name! I'm not ordering you, I just called my companion, right?”

Fushimi repeated 'companion' in a whisper. Yata didn't pay attention, left his back to Fushimi, and while concentrating on Hayato in front of him he spoke in Kamamoto's direction.

"We're taking these guys on!" Kamamoto immediately picked up on Yata's meaning.

“Charge in! We’ll make a way!” Saying that as he ran, Kamamoto performed a lariat on two blue clansmen at once with both arms. The blues who took it head on went flying. Responding to Kamamoto’s voice with a shout, the other Homura members followed. They focused on one point, in order to make a hole in the middle of the blue clansmen lined up to protect the Center.

Yata dodged Hayato’s sharply lowered blade, hit with his bat, moved through the air lightly on his board, and tried to lead Hayato away from the blue lines. At the same time, Fushimi also led Akito away from the lines... though it may have been more like the twins refused to let more than a specific amount of space be created between them.

“Minato brothers! Don’t let the formation crumble!” An older blue clansman who was fighting a member of Homura called out an order as though half crying for help, but the the twins paid no attention. Their eyes, underneath the cold surface, glittered with a light filled with heat. They drew murderous intent up and had eyes like innocently cruel children who were crushing ants while swinging their swords and pursuing Yata and Fushimi’s movements.

Yata’s board danced, and he swung his bat down from mid air with all his might to be blocked by Hayato. Lowering his waist and bending back a bit painfully, he sent it flying off to the side. Even during the moment he was being pressed by Yata, Hayato’s eyes were sparkling.

“Yata, right?” Asked Hayato.

“Yeah! Homura’s Yata- known as Yatagarasu!”

Clang! Went Yata’s bat and Hayato’s sword as they connected loudly. At nearly the exact same moment, Homura’s members broke the blue formation at the middle. It was in the midst of a confused melee, but in that space, there was a path from the courtyard to the research building.

Suou, who had been standing around in a bored way with his hands stuck in his pockets until then, moved. He took one step forward That alone made the feelings of all those present waver.

Homura felt excitement that their own king had begun to move, and pride that they were protecting the path he would walk. The blue clansmen felt fear towards the movements of an enemy they could not defeat, and panic that they would not be able to complete their responsibilities. Without paying any attention at all to either waver, Suou continued on leisurely. Kusanagi and Totsuka followed after him.

"R, reform the ranks! Protect the middle!"

“Don’t allow those thieves in!”

“Shut it!”

“We won’t let you get in Mikoto-san’s way!”

The yells from the blues and reds mixed, and the messy situation deepened. Within that, the twins facing Yata and Fushimi were not moved nor did they show any panic. They paid no attention to the red king who had begun to act, and were entranced only with the fight in front of them.

After countless strikes, the Minato brothers who had ended up facing Yata and Fushimi separately jumped away and landed in a position where they were right next to each other.

“...Is it okay for you guys to not do your jobs?” Yata said with a frown as he stood with one foot on his skateboard and with the right hand holding his bat lowered. Fushimi had a fairly large knife in his right hand, a throwing knife in his left, and he stood next to Yata.

Scepter 4’s job should be to prevent Homura from entering the Center. But these twins didn’t seem to be showing any interest in that responsibility.

“To cut the enemy in front of our eyes.”

“That’s our job.”

The twins split their lines between them.

These two, who were probably the ones with the most power in this place, should normally have been handing out orders- or at least following an experienced leader’s orders from the front, and fight to hold back Homura defensively. And yet, these twins weren’t seeing anything but the fight in front of them.

Fine then. Yata went 'hmp'.

“Alright, let’s do this!”

“Don’t let the blood rush to your head.”

At the same time that Fushimi rained on Yata’s announcement, the sound of the Center’s entrance being destroyed resounded.

“The third king, Suou Mikoto, has infiltrated the Center!”

At that announcement, Mizuchi’s constant faint smile froze for one moment. He had been prepared for this, but he could feel panic bubbling around his heart. Mizuchi closed his eyes silently for a little while, and accepted that feeling. Even

then, he had no intention of retreating. He had no intention of letting go of this 'possibility'.

...yes, this 'possibility'. It was something worthy of being put on a scale against destruction.

Mizuchi slowly opened his eyes, and looked towards Anna. The doll-like girl looked up at him with a pale face.

"Are you feeling like a princess waiting for her rescue?" In response to Mizuchi's words, Anna shook her head fiercely.

"I don't want to be saved." In response to Anna's words, Mizuchi deepened his usual smile.

"About your aunt..."

Anna's shoulders shook a little.

"You're going to protect her, aren't you?"

With a fearful color in her marble-like eyes, she looked up and nodded.

"Then you'll need to hurry. The only one who can stop a king is a king."

You'll need to hurry. Anna needed to become the blue king as quickly as possible. Mizuchi gently touched her hair. Straight hair that was cold like water.

“Pain in your heart, pain in your body... the more you're driven, the more your power will increase. Now, you should be able to reach the 'Slate'.”

One more time, Mizuchi said in a whisper.

“We'll make time. But you're the only one who can stop the red king... don't forget. You're not a princess who's waiting to be saved. You're a knight who has the duty of protecting her precious aunt and a human with the caliber of becoming king.”

This is a bet, Mizuchi thought. Whether the red king made it here or the 'rabbits' arrived before that, it would lead to Mizuchi's destruction. But even risking that danger, Mizuchi couldn't give up on Anna, on the 'Slate'.

It had been over ten years since Mizuchi had become a golden clansman. The golden king's eyes find the 'gold' sleeping within a person- in other words, the person's 'talent'. During the 'installation', that 'talent' is drawn out to its fullest and blossoms. Mizuchi gained a superpower from his 'installation' to join the golden clan. It was a power of recovery and rebirth. When his powers awakened, Mizuchi, who had been a researcher until then, thought that it was his mission in

life to /heal/ people. But that was just at the beginning.

Working beneath the golden wing, Mizuchi soon became unsatisfied. Was this really all, he felt as depression swelled within him. Having one's 'talent' blossom to its extreme... was also having one's limits shown to them, and it was a denial of 'possibility'. One time, his fellow clansman had called the golden king an incarnation of 'fate'. They were a silly person satisfied in the 'talent' brought out by the golden king, and they had decided to use up that 'talent' for the golden clan and by extension the country. Mizuchi couldn't empathize with them. He felt as though he had had his fate, his way of life decided for him by the golden king, as though all of his dreams and ambitions had been denied, and the depression within him increased.

It was around that time that the Kagutsu Crater Incident occurred.

Mizuchi had watched the previous red king, Kagutsu Genji's Sword of Damocles fall from what was barely a safe distance.

It had been amazing. Just when he thought the red light had exploded, an incredible wave of heat pushed against him, and a great piece of land was burned up. For a moment, Mizuchi couldn't understand what had happened. It took him some time to realize that that was a king's discharge... that the Weismann factor had gone past its limit and the Sword of Damocles had fallen.

The first thing he felt, before even fear, was admiration. He felt so much admiration that his body shook at the fact that a single person could hold this much power within them. He felt a crazed charm in and held a fierce interest in the mysterious object known as the 'Slate'.

The Dresden Slate. The thing that had the power to change humanity's history. Mizuchi drudged himself to death to acquire the seat of the Center's chief while holding his feelings towards the 'Slate' in his chest. He tried to get even one step closer to the 'Slate' by researching Strains who were created by some sort of activity by it.

The 'Slate' was protected by the golden king himself. Even for a golden clansman, there weren't many opportunities to experiment on it. But right now, within Mizuchi's hands was a powerful Strain. With her power, they may be able to contact the 'Slate'. It may even be possible to 'create a king'.

Mizuchi wanted that answer no matter what. At the moment, his boredom knew no end. If it was revealed that he had abused his position to perform inhumane experiments hidden from the 'Rabbits', then he wouldn't be able to avoid punishment. But if he managed to turn Anna into a king, he would get closer to the 'Slate's' mystery. He wouldn't even mind becoming a blue clansman like that. If he managed to get blue power as well as golden, then the golden king

would also no longer be able to deal with him as his own clansman. After that, he could just control Anna, the blue king, from the shadows.

Anyway, now was the time.

Mizuchi ordered Anna to reach out to the 'Slate' again and entrusted the researchers with her observation, as well as with 'helping' her along if necessary before leaving her personal experimentation room.

Shiotsu was waiting outside the room. As usual, he had a boring, flat look on his face and was wearing his uniform, which was supposed to be neat, all sloppily. This man couldn't be said to have a good attitude, but he'd do what he was told to the best of his ability and was skilled. He was a prized security guard.

"Shiotsu-kun. Come with me." Being spoken to, Shiotsu lazily moved to follow Mizuchi. Even though he was only about in his forties, he gave off the atmosphere of an old man.

"Where to?" He asked.

"Floor B." In response to Mizuchi's short reply, Shiotsu's eyebrow raised. Floor B. It was the floor where highly dangerous Strains who had stained their hands with violent crime were kept after being captured. In the past, the place where criminal Strains were kept was Scepter 4's detention center, but because no one

could be at ease keeping them there when the organization was weakening without its king, Mizuchi had taken all of those Strains into the Center.

Strains who had committed violent crimes had powerful abilities. They didn't interest him as much as Anna, but were still interesting samples.

The research building of this Center was larger than it looked from outside. Above ground was the standard research labs and the facilities for housing the Strains who had no problems during their stays for examination. But the Center was stretched deep into the underground. The underground was completely cut off from the above ground facility.

The floor here with Anna's experimentation room was on the lowest floor. The floor above it was Floor B.

"What exactly are you going to do there?"

"Preparations to slow down the red king."

He spoke as he walked quickly down the hall. His head was already full of simulations of what he should do next, and he no longer paid attention to Shiotsu walking beside him.

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With a heavy heart, Shiotsu followed Mizuchi from half a step behind.

For his own desires and interest, he was cornering a child and now was about to use violent Strains. He was probably going to offer them a deal. Tell them that if they beat the man who was about to come here he'd free them, and so throw them against the red king.

This man was heading towards destruction. Shiotsu thought that as he looked at Mizuchi from the side.

...no, he should be destroyed.

Surely it would be a tragedy if this man's ambitions were granted, a poor child became a king, and this man and they, Scepter 4, managed to get away. Even as he thought that, within Shiotsu was no willpower to move against this man. Without objecting, without thinking, he would move as ordered. When, exactly, had such a thing become part of him. Thinking for just a moment, then soon ceasing such thoughts, Shiotsu deepened his frown and closed his eyes.

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Once the twins had stopped fighting separately and returned to their usual fighting style... to where they attack one target with the two of them, their

strength increased greatly.

The twins were now only blocking Fushimi's attacks and stubbornly targeting Yata. Black haired Hayato's saber sharply stabbed at Yata's stomach. When he blocked it with his bat, brown haired Akito would aim for the blind spot created and slice down at Yata's neck. When Yata somehow did something about that while getting cut shallowly on his neck and shoulder and tried to counterattack, Hayato cut at his back.

Fushimi swung his knives surrounded by red power, flicking away Hayato's saber and feinting with his throwing knives. Hayato flicked the throwing knives away, but he was still mostly focused on Yata rather than Fushimi.

"Are... these guys really blues?" Yata glared at the blues while breathing heavily. His various shallow cuts hurt annoyingly and began to bleed. The twins giggled. They smiled, in a way that could be described as sweetly, which didn't match their indifferent features.

"Isn't it late to be saying that?"

"We're Scepter 4."

"We bring justice to those who sin."

“We’re guardians of our cause.”

Yata spat out a 'keh'. Fakey. Stupid. Of course he knew that these guys were part of the blue clan. But they weren't humans working for a great cause like they bragged. In fact, most of the blue clansmen here had nothing great like a 'cause'. He could tell by looking at the eyes of the blue clansmen who were facing off against the Homura members. They contained nothing like heat.

They had a blue barrier up around the area, and they tried to stop their opponents while protecting themselves from flames and strikes. But that was just like it was a chore, a fighting style straight out of a manual. They had no light in their eyes. It might appear nice and proper, but to Yata, they seemed to just be fighting as part of their job.

The current of the battle seemed equal at the time, but even if the other side's swords were sharper, or their skill was a bit higher, he didn't feel that Homura would lose. But within that, the twins in front of Yata and Fushimi stuck out. It wasn't a cause moving the twins. And yet, they weren't doing it for work, either.

It may have been most accurate to say they were playing. The swords they aimed at Yata with their eyes sparkling didn't have the aim of stopping him. They were swinging their power around like a toy and showing it off. They were like children. And to make things worse, their toy was quite brutal.

Yata, while being attacked, hadn't taken a serious injury. But, the small damages were adding up and he was getting worn down. Yata irritably wiped off the blood slowly dripping from his neck to his collarbone. It was a place where, if it had been a bit deeper, it would have definitely endangered his life. Yata, who had just become a clansman and didn't have much battle experience realized that again and felt a chill. Faint goosebumps came up on his arm.

“What's wrong?”

“You don't have time to be thinking, do you?”

The twins leaped as they spoke in turn. The next moment, Hayato landed in front of Yata and brandished his blade. As he stepped back and barely dodged, he heard a metallic clang behind him. Just from their presence, he knew that as he had been attacked from the front he had also been targeted from behind, which Fushimi had prevented. Without even waiting a moment, Yata used his deeply twisted knee as a spring to jump forward, putting the power of flame into his metal bat and swung at the side of Hayato's face.

His opponent had an opening from missing his attack. The other half, Akito, was still facing Fushimi and couldn't help in time. But Hayato's reflexes weren't normal, either. He caught Yata's bat on the hilt of his sword.

Another metallic clang resounded.

Yata pressed forward strongly, and used the reaction to jump back in order to avoid staying like that. Hayato raised the corners of his mouth as though impressed. With an expression that almost said 'You can do this a little, huh', he looked at Yata, who felt blood rushing to his head.

...this guy is certain that he's going to win.

Hayato's expression had no panic or fear. In fact, he seemed glad, and looked at Yata like a beast licking its lips in front of prey.

"Yata." Fushimi called him. It wasn't the given name Yata got annoyed at. It was a serious tone and a serious way of calling him.

"There's no end to it like this. We'll both aim for one guy at once, too." In response to that hushed announcement, Yata widened his eyes.

"Don't joke around! How could we do something unfair like that!" When he lashed out, Fushimi glared at him in annoyance.

"I haven't been able to do anything but cover for you. It's pissing me off already." While Fushimi's words were flat, they had a dangerous tone beneath them. Enough to make even Yata scared for a moment. Fushimi was truly

irritated. Yata stopped howling carelessly and tightened his expression.

“...even then, I won’t fight unfairly.”

Fushimi glared strictly at Yata. Yata returned that gaze straight on, then looked towards the twins.

"Thing is, Saru. I won’t be satisfied if I don’t beat up these prideless jerks head on.” He intentionally said it loud enough for the twins to hear. Their eyebrows twitched.

“Prideless? What do you mean by that?”

“Are you going to use us fighting unfairly as an excuse for why you can’t beat us?”

Yata laughed out loud as if to make fun of them.

“Wrong. I’m not gonna say this or that about your way of doing things.” Yata’s eyes, which were already showing their whites, sharpened their gaze as they watched the twins. The annoyance he had always felt since meeting these twins. Even though even these guys must have been attracted by their king, chosen, and given power, they used their fellow clansmen as though they didn’t care about them. On top of that, they used the power they once received from their king like

waving a toy around.

Yata's powers were something he received from Suou. These powers were his pride, and something to be used for Suou's sake. He glared sharply at the twins.

"I just can't stand you guys when you're waving around the power you got from your king without any honor, like you're playing or something!"

"What do you know?" Akito raised his voice like a beast's growl, which didn't suit his indifferent face.

Minato Hayato with black hair, and Minato Akito with brown hair. Those twins, who could only really be told apart by the color of their hair, let a blue light rise fiercely from their blue-clad bodies like steam. It's something that occurs when a clansman raises their power. Now, it seemed like the twins were surrounded by blue fire.

"I'll leave my back to you." Yata said this to Fushimi while keeping his eyes on the twins. Fushimi looked like he wanted to respond, but Yata ignored him, raised his hands, and tied up the power within him. The flames within his body. Having them flare up for a moment, but not let them flow out of control, as though bringing up a spear of flame, concentrating it on one point and sharpening it, he imagined something like that. From Yata's heightened body,

like the twins, flames the color of his king fiercely rose up.

The color of Yata's light was Suou's red.

He felt the mark of Homura, the 'proof' of being Suou's clansman on his left collarbone take on heat.

Fushimi had a headache that felt like his temple was being compressed and twisted his face. He was irritated. He clenched his teeth. The twins, whose fighting style was good at avoiding attacks from anyone other than their target, were avoiding all of Fushimi's attacks and focusing just on Yata. The fact that he couldn't get the twin's attention for more than just a moment was stressing him out.

Perhaps because of some tacit understand because they were twins, or perhaps because they had spent long years fighting together and were completely in sync, between the two of them there was a perfect connection that didn't exist between Fushimi and Yata. They didn't just look alike. They weren't just twins. He didn't know what kind of situation they were in, but if they were clansmen of the previous blue king, then they would have had power since they were very young. They had probably always been beside each other, fought together, and gone through many things together just the two of them.

Their world was complete with just the two of them.

There was no way a superficial connection could win over theirs.

While tormenting himself, Fushimi felt irritation to the point of pain and noticed something like envy within it, which made him feel sick. They were sharing their world. All of their happiness, unhappiness, pride, thoughts, and memories—that was all shared between them. Clearly, with not even a hint of a gap.

...So what.

To Fushimi, the pride towards power received from their king, and adoration towards that king that Yata went on about, and the twins waving their power about and enjoying themselves were both not very different in how /distant/ they were. He even thought that they were both the same.

Apart from Fushimi, who had no way to deal with his irritation, Yata was glaring straight at the twins and had power filling his body. Red, red. His full body was surrounded by the color of the power given to him by that person. He pulled his shirt's collar down and showed off his 'mark' of Homura.

“On Homura's honor, I'm going to beat you guys!”

...Aah, this was annoying.

Yata kicked the ground hard. His board went charging straight at the twins. The red shine surrounding him turned to flames. Having become a fireball, he jumped on his skateboard, cut through the air, and the flames he was wrapped in fluttered. The trailing fire looked like wings. He became like a great crow dancing through the sky, so that the stupid nickname, “Yatagarasu”, that he gave himself almost seemed appropriate.

The twins had also charged their energy to its limit, but even then they avoided taking Yata head on. One jumped left and the other jumped right as Yata dove in between them. After landing, he cut away at the ground with the wheels of his board as he twisted around and went after Hayato.

Akito aimed for Yata from behind. Even while clicking his tongue, Fushimi blocked Akito’s sword to protect Yata’s back. Fushimi’s knife and Akito’s saber hit each other, and blue and red light fought against each other. Fushimi twisted his wrist to divert the saber, jumped back and tossed a throwing knife.

He thought he had aimed for an opening, but Akito knocked it away.

“U, ooooooooooh!” Along with a shout from his gut, Yata who was now a single fireball dove at Hayato.

It was the first time any nervousness appeared on Hayato’s face. He dodged

Yata's bat swing at the very last moment. The blue flames spilling from Hayato's body, proof of his power, were torn away by Yata's flaming bat. They didn't cancel each other out. /It had been torn away/. Yata's powers were above Hayato's.

Akito turned pale and tried to go to Hayato's support. He ran towards Yata's defenseless back and swung his saber. Fushimi tried to throw another knife... and clicked his tongue.

The throwing knives he had hidden on him had run out with that last one. Yata's bat and Hayato's saber connected. Yata was forcing Hayato back. His blue flames were shrinking as though they were overpowered. But Akito was aiming for Yata from behind. In a moment, Fushimi hurriedly calculated.

Pausing against Akito had been a bad idea. Even if he chased Akito, before Fushimi got Akito he would undoubtedly cut Yata first. On top of that, going by how Akito had lost his composure, he likely intended to cut right through Yata.

But despite that, Yata was looking at no one but his opponent, Hayato. Even though he knew about the twins' strategy, even though he understood that he was being targeted by both of them at once, he wasn't paying attention to Akito at all.

(I'll leave my back to you)

Saying that without even listening to his opinion, Yata defenselessly and blindly trusted him. Yata didn't think even a little about the possibility of Fushimi messing up or not protecting him.

Along with irritation, Fushimi felt his head start hurting horribly again. He lifted the close range knife in his right hand. If he let go of this, he'd be left unarmed, but Akito would have to be occupied for a moment while knocking it away. The odds would be against him if he used his fists against a saber, but it wasn't like he couldn't do it. Fushimi's knife, containing his power, cut through the air with a sharp noise.

However, Akito didn't even try to turn around in order to toss away that knife, nor did he try to dodge it. Fushimi's knife cut into his shoulder with a thud. It didn't seem as though he hadn't noticed Fushimi's knife fly. He took the knife to his shoulder, and while he faltered for just a moment, he didn't so much as try to put pressure on the wound.

Even with a knife sticking out of his right shoulder, Akito supported his sword hand with his left, and swung his saber down with both hands and all his strength. That blade, surrounded in blue light, aimed right for Yata's defenseless back. Fushimi felt a chill.

On the spur of the moment, he looked at the knife still in Akito's shoulder. It still

had Fushimi's power in it, and faintly shone red. He was still connected to that knife. The power of being Suou Mikoto's clansman that was within his body. He took that and forced it all into the knife he had put his power into. He concentrated until his eyes hurt, and the knife in Akito's shoulder burned red.

Even then, until the very last moment, Akito's will to fight for the sake of saving Hayato didn't crumble. But, because of Fushimi's power aimed at his shoulder, he couldn't hold his saber up anymore and it fell from his hands.

Akito falling to the ground, and Hayato being struck on his upper arm after creating an opening and stumbled as his power was shaved off happened at nearly the exact same instant.

Hayato went flying as he took a powered up hit from Yata head on. Yata was also breathing hard after letting loose a full power attack without holding back. The flames surrounding him lessened, and the red light that was proof of his power became weaker. Hayato, who had fallen after going flying, saw Akito lying on the ground with his shoulder torn up, and turned pale.

"Ah, ah...." Spilling a voice like a moan, he widened his thin eyes, and glared death at Yata.

In response to Hayato shakily getting up, Yata, despite being out of breath, held

his bat up, and put a foot on his board so he could leap out at any time. But before the two of them could face off again, two red lights flew, and both of them struck Hayato's dominant arm. Hayato couldn't take it and fell again.

"!... Saruhiko!" Yata raised his voice accusingly.

Fushimi had picked up the two knives knocked away by Akito earlier and thrown them.

"That guy was mine!"

"SHUT UP!"

Fushimi shouted violently.

In response to that furious voice he'd normally never let out, Yata widened his eyes. Fushimi gripped both of his hands into fists, and desperately clenched his teeth to try and bite down his irritation. His head hurt like it was being squeezed again.

So annoying. So annoying. So annoying.

Yata's way of fighting. The way he completely trusted Fushimi- no, trusted his /comrades/ and showed his back to the enemy. Fushimi went up to Hayato, who

despite groaning on the ground was still trying to grab his saber, and stomped on his hand. Fushimi kicked the saber away.

So annoying. So annoying. So annoying.

The way Yata hadn't paid any attention to the fact that his life was in danger while only looking ahead, while Fushimi was the only one feeling a chill.

Every single bit of it hit a nerve.

"Saruhiko." Yata loudly called to Fushimi once more. Fushimi clicked his tongue, and forcing down the irritation within him, he looked back at the fighting between Homura and Scepter 4 members.

"...we'll take down the rest."

"R, right." Yata, who looked surprised at Fushimi's behavior, seemed to have already forgotten his irritation from before.

In response to that simple straightforwardness, Fushimi ground his teeth.

Kusanagi used his thumb to flick his lighter open.

A small flame appeared with a crackle, and the next instant it swelled. The fire

split up, reacted loyally to Kusanagi's thoughts, and scattered into several fireballs. Screams rose from the point of their impact.

Several blue clansmen who had been protecting the Center were burnt, while several others managed to defend against the fireballs using barriers that spread out from their sabers. Without pausing, Kusanagi swung the hand still holding his lighter to the side. Those movements caused the flame to /stretch/.

That flame became like a whip and sharpened as it burnt the air and scattered heat around, then assaulted a clansman who had just defended against those fireballs. The startled clansman tried to hold out against the fiery whip by filling their glowing blue saber with power. But, just before that could happen, Kusanagi flicked his wrist.

The flame that resembled a burning snake slipped by the blue clansman's saber and dug sharply into their body. The burnt clansman screamed and fell. The fiery whip swiftly dealt with each of the remaining clansmen in turn, lazily moving about whenever one of them tried to dodge or block it. Eventually, the whip left Kusanagi's hand and lunged at the last remaining blue clansman. When they fell like some great snake's prey, the whip silently vanished.

Kusanagi put a cigarette in his mouth and used the lighter's now normal flame to light it up. Suou, who had been standing around behind Kusanagi and looking

bored, yawned. Beside him, Totsuka had the Center's map displayed in the air from his terminal while he viewed the enemies who had been gotten rid of in mere moments.

"It's been a while since the last time I saw Kusanagi-san fight." Kusanagi listened to Totsuka's relaxed voice while puffing on his cigarette and looking down at the fallen, moaning blue clansmen.

"Uh... pardon the sudden raid~. We're just here to pick up a little girl who's bein' treated unfairly. If possible, we'd like to avoid any unnecessary fightin'. For the sake of avoidin' pointless injuries, please make an effort not to come at us from here on out."

After saying that, Kusanagi turned back to Totsuka.

"So?"

"It looks like Anna-chan's in the basement after all, but I guess it won't be easy to get down there, huh... I think it'd be quickest to have someone tell us how."

Kusanagi went 'hmm' and looked up at the ceiling. Right then, behind him from the shadow of the open door, a blue clansman who had his saber out attacked Kusanagi by swinging his blade down at Kusanagi's back. He was fast. He closed the distance by leaping forward, and the saber's blade was about to rip

open Kusanagi's shoulder.

Without even turning around, Kusanagi flicked the butt of his cigarette behind him. The lit tabacco came up in front of the blue clansman's eyes, and the next instant the tiny flame expanded and swelled, then swallowed him up. He fell without a cry.

While complaining quietly about how 'the cigarette was still long', Kusanagi turned his eyes towards the room the clansman who just attacked him came out of. A man in a white coat who appeared to be a researcher had been peeking out of the room and trying to see what was going on when his eyes met with Kusanagi's and his shoulders shook.

Kusanagi moved his long legs and went right into the middle of the room. The man in the white coat jumped and readied himself, but he then took a combat stance upon seeing Kusanagi approach. Before he could do anything, Kusanagi got up in his space and drove his knee into the man's stomach while holding back. The man in the coat groaned and leaned in on himself. Kusanagi forced the man's arm behind his back and tied his hands there using the tie from his neck. He then dragged the moaning man out of the room by his collar.

"Totsuka, ask him nicely." Kusanagi said that as he leaned the man in the white coat against the wall, left him there, and took the terminal out of Totsuka's

hands. He looked at the map the terminal was displaying in the air and considered the situation, comparing how things were when they came in to how they were now. Totsuka tilted his head in a troubled way before giving up and kneeling down in front of the man in the coat.

“We’re looking for a kid named Kushina Anna. She’s being held in this Center, right? Would you tell us how to get to where she is?” Totsuka asked with a smile, but the man just clicked his tongue and turned away without answering. Totsuka scratched his head.

“I guess it can’t be helped if you won’t tell us... sorry, I’m weak, but my powers are good for torture.”

“.....wha?” The man’s face twitched at Totsuka’s words.

“I’m pretty sure she’s in the basement’s facility, but we can’t figure out how to get down there. Could you tell us?” The look on the face of the researcher who hadn’t responded with anything but a tongue click a moment ago had changed. He started to sweat when Totsuka smiled at him.

Suou, who had been waiting boredly behind the others, apparently got tired of staying quiet and gestured at their feet while scratching his ear.

“The basement, right? Can’t we just get there by opening a hole in the floor?”

Totsuka smiled wryly at that blunt opinion.

“King, Kusanagi-san told you not to do anything crazy, right? If we’re going to dig a hole, let’s make one in this person first.”

“...hole?” When the researcher asked that nervously, Totsuka smiled at him in a friendly way.

“Yep.”

Totsuka narrowed his eyes and stared at the wall right next to the researcher’s face. After a moment, with a sizzle, a small black hole opened in the wall. Smoke rose from it.

“Eek!” The researcher let out a short cry and twisted his body away from the hole in the wall.

“I can open holes like that. Since it burns, there isn’t a lot of blood. So if I pick the right places, even if I make several, I don’t think you’d die right away...”

Totsuka tilted his head while smiling.

“What do you wanna do? Should I start digging?”

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Ever since that morning, the Center was in a strange state.

The workers were oddly unable to calm down and were going back and forth within the Center. And then there was a strange announcement that 'you must not leave your rooms today'. The Strains living in the Center were feeling anxious that there might have been some kind of incident when they heard a roar from outside. Then, there was the sound of an explosion that shook the building.

The Strain boy tried to rush out in a hurry when he heard the sound of that explosion. However, his room was locked. Normally, the Strains being examined at the Center were allowed to move freely about the Center as long as they didn't cause trouble, but it was set up so that the rooms could be locked by the Center if something happened. The boy clicked his tongue and moved away from the door.

He remembered those red clansmen he had met before. At first, he had spoken to them assuming they were new Strains, but then he was taken away to a deserted spot and threatened into telling them about the Center. It seemed as though they believed that something evil was being done by the Center. The boy himself had never had anything bad happen to him. At first, he had been scared of what they

might do to him, but then he was just made to fill out some forms and register as a Strain, then taught the laws that apply to Strains. They investigated his ability, and then checked how well he could control it, and that was it. He was told that he would receive compensation if he kept coming back for tests, so he'd visit the Center occasionally. This time, he was also just here for the usual examinations.

Until he met those red clansmen, the boy himself hadn't felt any sort of mistrust towards the Center. However, he had heard several dark rumors about it. According to those, powerful Strains were hidden away in the Center's basement and turned into test subjects. According to those, Strains who had committed crimes were altered and turned into human weapons. Stuff like that.

The boy hadn't paid them any attention, since it seemed natural for a facility like this to give birth to such rumors. But the boy had coincidentally heard Mizuchi giving out orders to tense workers as though they were trying to hide something before an inspection from the 'Rabbits'.

“Hurry up and dispose of it. If the 'Rabbits' get onto us, it'll be a problem.”

At the time, he hadn't thought anything of it. He had just thought it was unusual that chief Mizuchi, who was usually so calm and at ease, was behaving like a middle-schooler who had heard rumors about an inspection and was trying to find a way to deal with his adult magazines. But, now that he thought about it...

There was another boom from somewhere, and he could still hear roaring from outside the Center. The red clan was attacking the Center. He couldn't think of any other possibility. He remembered the red clansmen who had sneaked in. They were kinda scary and really caused trouble for him, but he didn't think they were bad people. They claimed they had threatened him into guiding them when Mizuchi glared at him, like they were protecting him.

The boy felt unease rising from within his heart. What's going on? Was it okay for him to just stay here like he was told by the workers? Would the Center even be okay?

...I'm going to leave.

He came to a decision rather easily. The door was locked, but if he really tried, it wouldn't be hard to leave the room.

This place is probably dangerous.

Hearing those explosions and disquieting voices, and sensing the Center's disturbed atmosphere because he was someone with powers, the boy made his decision like a rat about to escape a sinking ship

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Suou, Kusanagi, and Totsuka were on an elevator that activated with a biometric scan and were headed down towards the basement. The 'biometrics' needed to move the elevator were provided by the man in a white coat from earlier.

“Kusanagi-saaan, would you please not force the unpleasant roles off on me?”
Totsuka, who nearly had to torture someone, looked at Kusanagi with his eyes half closed. Kusanagi let that look go over his head.

“At least work that much. Gettin’ people to talk is your specialty, anyway.”

“IF it’s in a peaceful way.”

“It was plenty peaceful, wasn’t it? In the end, he told us the way to the basement without any further violence.”

Apparently, using the lab coat man’s biometrics key, they wouldn’t be able to get to the lowest floor. In fact, apparently the elevator didn’t even go all the way down. It seemed that the further down someone went, the more dangerous and powerful the Strains kept there became. In order to go there, one would have to switch to a different elevator in the basement and would need a higher level key.

At the moment, they would only be able to reach the floor with slightly secret research rooms. The elevator boarded by three people slowly opened. Kusanagi prepared himself a bit, assuming there would be enemies waiting on the other side. There were indeed enemies. But they didn't attack as the door opened. Kusanagi saw who it was and smiled bitterly.

Getting off the elevator, he spoke to the other two without turning around.

“...sorry. Could you go on ahead?”

“Kusanagi-san?” Totsuka called out to him questioningly. Kusanagi smiled and shrugged.

“This guy's my buddy. I'm gonna talk with him a little, so you guys go on and get Anna-chan.”

Totsuka looked at Suou. Suou looked thoughtfully between Kusanagi and the enemy standing before them for a moment. It was a man wearing a loose, messy blue uniform. He had lots of white mixed into his hair. It was Scepter 4's replacement leader, Shiotsu Gen.

Totsuka looked at Shiotsu's face, then moved his eyes to Kusanagi, a bit worriedly.

“Kusanagi-san.”

“Don’t worry. You make sure Suou doesn’t go overboard.”

In response to hearing that said jokingly like Kusanagi was forcing the role of babysitter off on Totsuka, Suou frowned deeper in protest. He sighed lightly and stepped forward. As he passed by Kusanagi, he snagged the cigarette box out of Kusanagi’s breast pocket. He took one out, put it in his mouth, and carelessly threw it behind him. Kusanagi looked exasperated as he caught the box.

“What happened to yours?”

“I forgot it at the bar.” Saying that roughly, Suou flicked the cigarette he took without permission and lit it.

As he passed by Shiotsu, Suou didn’t acknowledge the man at all. He just passed by as though taking a leisurely walk, as though the blue clan’s leader was just some sort of pillar. Totsuka looked between the three others as he followed.

Shiotsu didn’t move as Suou and Totsuka passed him by. He didn’t try to attack them or stand in their way. He didn’t even really look in their direction as he stood there like a post.

As he watched Suou and Totsuka disappear down the hall, Kusanagi took his

own cigarette from the box and lit it. The smell of tobacco drifted through the Center's inorganic halls. Purple smoke rose thinly.

"You sure let them go easy."

When Kusanagi said that wryly, Shiotsu snorted.

"There wouldn't be any point."

"Haha, then why don't y'just go home and take a nap?"

"I'd like to, but..."

"Thanks to receivin' unreasonable orders, a bunch of your boys upstairs got hurt."

"Fortunately, the golden clan has a hospital right next door. I'm sure they'll be healed up nicely." Shiotsu's tone sounded like he was just throwing out his words, and it always seemed a little desperate, somehow. Kusanagi knew what was behind that. And, somewhere in his heart, he was feeling both empathy and sympathy towards this man.

"How 'bout you quit? ...being a clansman without a lord is nothin' but hard, right?"

“Apparently, Mizuchi is going to /give/ us a lord.” Shiotsu suddenly spat that out. Kusanagi’s expression hardened.

“...you’re talkin’ about Anna-chan, huh. Are you guys okay with that? Are the blue clansmen okay with forcin’ a little kid into a corner and making her your king?”

“Of course not.” An irritation that had warped under too much pressure appeared in Shiotsu’s voice. The personal feelings he had hidden became clear. It was a voice like the growling of an old, wounded beast. Hearing that, Kusanagi understood Shiotsu’s feelings and shut his mouth.

With deep wrinkles in his face, Shiotsu put a hand on his saber. The cold blue blade appeared with a click. Shiotsu held it up, and from his body spilled the blue light that was proof of his power. He spoke in a heavy voice.

“I advance with sword in hand, because my cause is pure.”

“Don’t lie.” Kusanagi smiled bitterly.

“Your cause is totally impure. Even though you’re the guy who knows that best, it’s impressive you have the gall to say something so fakey.”

Shiotsu said nothing. He didn't object, or show his anger. He simply looked back at Kusanagi with blank eyes.

The tip of his sword did not waver.

Kusanagi sighed.

"...well, I guess that's still your job, officer."

"That's right." With a voice like a rock, Shiotsu replied. It sounded like the voice of someone much older.

"Eliminating dangerous elements like you guys is Scepter 4's duty. I have no intention of debating where my cause lies with you."

The corner of Kusanagi's mouth twitched into a smile. He held out the hand holding his lighter horizontally and got ready.

"No wastin' your breath... in other words?"

"Yeah... get on with it, brat."

Shiotsu's saber was clad in blue light.

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Even if her skin was burned or she was sunk into water, she was immediately healed.

There won't be any scars left on your body. Nor will there be any aftereffects. Of course, you won't die, either. Right now, we're just giving you the stimulation you need. Your powers become more sensitive the more you're driven into a corner. Mizuchi said this with the smile usually stuck on his face.

Since she was told this so naturally, she was led to believe it was also a matter of course for her to just endure it. Anna slowly opened her eyes. She was in a tube of water. It was a thin tube like a pillar, just big enough for her to stand up in it. The sleeves of her clothes swayed in the water.

The water was nearly up to Anna's face. Until just a moment ago, it was above her head, and stealing away her breath. In order to escape the pain of her body, Anna had been tearing her consciousness and senses away from it and sending them towards the tower's 'Slate'.

A bunch of electrodes were stuck to Anna's body. Cords stretched from them, allowing her biological information to be checked. Attached to so many cords, it was as though she were trapped in a spider's web.

“No abnormalities in consciousness level.”

“Physical wave spectors, stable.”

“How is it, how far have you gotten with accessing the 'Slate'?”

She could hear the researchers' voices from outside the glass. She raised her head. She could see several people in white clothes. They were glaring at the machines while watching Anna as though she were an inanimate object.

“...the same as before. I heard the 'Slate'. But it hit me back.”

Hearing her reply, the scientists discussed something as though they were whispering amongst themselves.

“At this point, it doesn't appear as though sharpening via pain is very effective...”

“Right now, her powers are at a height. Rather than stimulating her, perhaps we should have her focus on accessing the 'Slate' and make her only think of synchronizing with it...”

While they went back and forth somewhere unrelated to Anna, she felt the water in the tube drain out. Apparently, she was to be released from being submerged for this experiment. As the water disappeared, Anna's hair, which had drifted

through the water like seaweed, stuck on to her body.

Her lungs, which had been filled with water until a moment ago, still felt kind of choked. But this was healed right away, and no sign of her earlier pain was left on her body. She closed her eyes. When she did that, the inside of her eyelids looked red, making the presence she had tried to lock out of her consciousness feel raw.

That person is coming.

A hot, strong, beautiful, red presence.

It had come very close.

Anna's heart began to beat fast, and she tried desperately to force it down. It felt as though her feelings would mix up and make it so she couldn't stay in control. It was wrong to have expectations. What she had to hold right now was a sense of danger. She had to succeed in contacting the 'Slate' and become the blue king before that person reached this place. Even as she told herself that, she couldn't completely hold down her wavering heart.

She wanted to be saved.

She didn't want him to come.

Between those conflicting feelings, Anna wavered.

“Honami.”

As though casting a spell, Anna spoke the name of the person she needed to protect. A kind, warm person with a pretty voice. Someone who always tried to wrap Anna up. The reason why Anna hadn’t fallen to pieces after her parents died was because Honami was there for her.

She would protect Honami. There was no way she would let Honami meet the same fate as her parents.

She wanted to be saved.

She didn’t want him to come.

+++++

Honami looked up with a start.

“Anna?”

She felt like she had been called. Honami was sitting on the couch in Suou’s room at the bar. She was waiting as she had been told, trapped without knowing

what she was supposed to be waiting for. Some boys who were likely Suou's friends were in the bar downstairs. They were concerned for Honami, but they had probably been ordered by Suou and wouldn't let her leave.

(I'm what you would call a monster.)

(If I had to say one or the other, your niece is also someone leaning towards this side.)

Suou's words circled through her head. Honami didn't understand what he was trying to say. She didn't understand anything except that she knew nothing about what was important. She put her face in her hands and looked down. Her black hair fell forward from her shoulders.

She thought about when she took Anna in. When Anna's parents- Honami's brother and his wife died in an accident, Anna had lost any expression and refused to talk, like a doll. She had lost her parents suddenly at such a young age. Honami assumed it was because of that without suspecting a thing, and wished to heal Anna's wounds even just a little.

But, what if the cause of Anna closing off her heart was not just the simple fact that she had lost her parents?

What if Honami hadn't understood anything about Anna?

Honami got up off the sofa. She felt a stirring in her chest. She had no way of knowing what was happening to Anna. But, it was certain that the girl was in some sort of dangerous situation. Honami looked at the window.

It was bright outside. She went up to the window and opened it. From the opened window, a soft wind drifted inside. As Honami's hair was swayed by the spring breeze, she remembered the past.

"You're not cut out for being a teacher." Suou, with an exasperated look, had told her that back when he was in highschool. She couldn't remember the context anymore, but it was probably when Suou had caused a problem and she had let him off or protected him.

"Really? I'd get angry if someone did something that was actually bad." When she said that with a tilt of her head, he looked even more exasperated.

"...you really live by your own rules, huh."

Honami hadn't really been assessed that way before, so she gave Suou a look full of interest. He glanced at her, then spoke as if he didn't care.

"You only do what you want."

That may be the case, Honami thought now as she looked at the opened window. She didn't know what she ought to do. It wasn't as though she didn't trust Suou. She thought he surely had a reason for seriously attempting to keep her there. But since she couldn't get him to tell her that reason, it didn't seem as though she would be able to keep waiting.

She didn't know what she ought to do. But she clearly knew what she wanted to do. If Anna was in danger, if she was in pain, then Honami wanted to run to her right away. Honami pushed herself out the window.

This was the third floor. Honami carefully stepped on the bar's thin eaves and exited the window entirely. She walked sideways while sticking close to the brick walls. The wind blew and swayed her hair. Coming to the corner of the bar, she slowly moved across to the small boutique next door. The eaves became even more thin, to the point that she could barely stand on the balls of her feet. After managing to move across, she hugged the wall and tip toed over to gently lower herself to the boutique's shade. She felt the shade's thick cloth beneath her feet. It managed to hold up her weight, and she jumped down from it to the ground. The shock of having jumped down from a high spot made her legs numb.

Standing up, her eyes met those of someone working in the boutique, and they gave her a shocked look.

“I’m sorry, excuse me.” She bowed her head politely to the worker and ran off. She took off up the quiet hill with the bar behind her.

She was off to pick up Anna.

She was so inexperienced she couldn’t even see through Anna’s problems, but right now, Honami was Anna’s guardian- she was Anna’s mother.

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The fireballs from Kusanagi’s lighter assaulted Shiotsu like a lunging beast.

Right before he was swallowed up by the flying flames, Shiotsu put more power into the blue light surrounding his saber. The saber was swung as though to slice the approaching fireballs in half. The flaming red spheres and the blue blade cancelled each other out. As Shiotsu dealt with the fireballs, she also stepped forward to attack. A blue line was traced in the air.

Kusanagi dodged back lightly and tried to kick Shiotsu’s torso. However, Shiotsu twisted away and sliced his saber upwards diagonally. Kusanagi bent and avoided the blade just barely. As he felt the breeze from the sword sway his

bangs, he spat his cigarette out in Shiotsu's direction.

The cigarette suddenly swelled into a great fireball right in front of Shiotsu's eyes and swallowed him up. Being licked by the tongues of the flame he gave birth to, Kusanagi remained bent over, put a hand on the floor, and got back.

...did he do it?

Right as he felt some resistance, Shiotsu sprung out and at Kusanagi from the flames that had swallowed his body. It wasn't to escape the fire. Even as he was burned by those flames, he was only looking at Kusanagi, and only thinking of swinging his saber.

Kusanagi wasn't expecting that, and his reaction was a moment late. Moving without a care for the fact that his uniform was on fire and burning him, Shiotsu sliced at Kusanagi. Kusanagi tried to guard quickly and the saber's tip sliced his arm, sending blood flying. He grimaced and jumped far back, putting distance between them.

Shiotsu, who was still burning, didn't try to close that distance right away. He strengthened the blue flames surrounding his body. With a sizzle, the flames burning his uniform vanished. Control. It was the effect of the blue clansmen's barrier. By wrapping himself in a blue barrier, he had erased the red clansman's

fire.

Despite that, Shiotsu had taken the fireball born from Kusanagi's cigarette flame head on. His blue uniform was blackened, and the skin showing was burned black and red. Even then, Shiotsu didn't bat an eyelid, and simply readied his saber with a melancholy, annoyed sort of look.

Kusanagi raised an eyebrow and laughed wryly.

"Maan... since you weren't too enthused about your cause or whatever, I thought you'd just go easy... but you fight surprisingly hard."

"I'm getting paid, after all." Shiotsu replied in a voice that sounded bored after all.

"You'll do your pay's worth of work, that's the spirit of a pro... you mean?"

Kusanagi smiled cynically after saying that.

"Nah. You just don't wanna bother thinkin' anymore."

Shiotsu's eyebrow twitched slightly.

"You don't wanna think about anythin' anymore, so you stopped and you've

been draggin' yourself along for ten whole years out of force of habit, haven't you."

Before he realized it, he was speaking in a taunting way. Kusanagi was surprised at himself. When he taunted people, he'd taunt them as part of a plan. He didn't just do it without thinking about it, like this. But he continued.

"You're totally sick of this job, aren't you. You're thinkin' it's stupid. And yet, you're killin' those feelings and just movin' your body. Are you a robot or something?"

"You sure talk a lot, even though you're in the middle of a fight." Shiotsu narrowed his eyes and glared irritably at Kusanagi. Kusanagi glared back.

"You're obsessed with your king, you lean up on him, and then once he's gone you just stop thinkin' with your own head!?"

As he said that as though making fun of Shiotsu, the gap between them which was supposed to be wide was closed. Shiotsu's saber stabbed straight at Kusanagi. That stab was overflowing with anger, in contrast to the movements before that were robotic and held no emotion. Kusanagi dodged it and pointed his lighter at Shiotsu. Fireballs sped at him with the speed of bullets, but Shiotsu's saber dealt with them. The forth shot was long and drawn out, like the

fire from a flamethrower.

Shiotsu straightened up his saber and spread a blue forcefield. It split the flames like a rock in the way of a river's flow. But Kusanagi turned the lighter turned into a flamethrower sideways. The flow of fire became thin, and turned into a flaming serpent. The fiery snake, split in two, separated from the lighter and tried to wrap around Shiotsu's body like it was a creature with a will of its own.

Shiotsu spun his saber around and cut one of those snakelike flames as though he were stroking it, which canceled it out. However, the other snake squirmed and dodged Shiotsu's sword like it was teasing him, then aimed for his body.

Shiotsu had his concentration stolen by his attempts to cut away the fire snake, which was like trying to grab smoke. Even then, the struggle only lasted but a few seconds. But, the moment Shiotsu's saber caught the snake and his blue power pressed onto the flames and snuffed them out, those bulletlike fireballs assaulted him while his guard was down.

They had more power than before. Shiotsu fell without a word.

"...don't get up again." Kusanagi said that bitterly while looking down at Shiotsu, who was burned black.

"You did your pay's worth of work, didn't you. I didn't come here to fight you

guys. Stop gettin' in the way."

He heard a low laugh from by his feet. Kusanagi frowned and looked down at the owner of the voice- at Shiotsu who was burnt up and in a sorry state. Shiotsu raised his face. On top of the face of an old man who didn't care anymore, there was a smile. His eyes alone shone strangely, looking up at Kusanagi.

"Ahh, it's been a while since anything hurt like this... ten years ago, maybe I should've gone ahead and tasted this pain."

"Make your confessions elsewhere, please." In response to Kusanagi's cold reply, Shiotsu twisted the corner of his mouth into a taunting smile.

"You're scared, aren't you."

Kusanagi wasn't expecting that, and looked at him questioningly.

"...of what."

"You're scared that /you might end up like me someday/, aren't you."

Kusanagi stopped breathing. He wanted to kick himself for reacting like Shiotsu had hit a bullseye.

That had always quietly been inside Kusanagi's heart.

“Apparently, that's the previous red king's power.” He remembered talking to Suou about the Kagutsu Crater. It was when they talked about how the crater was the result of the previous red king's power, and the sword of Damocles.

“Huh.” Suou just responded vaguely, without any interest. But Kusanagi realized that those eyes seemed to be looking at something distant, admiring something.

...you wanna go over there.

Kusanagi never let the feelings smoldering in his chest out of his mouth.

A bomb that wants to explode.

That was how Kusanagi had seen Suou since before Suou had become king. Back when Suou was just a single human, Kusanagi had gotten angry at him for going too far and getting hurt. Probably, mixed in within the anger he felt back then was something like a feeling of guilt that ended up shoving him into a position along with Totsuka where he had to call Suou king.

Back then, Kusanagi got angry while Suou looked at him with a wry smile.

Now, Kusanagi would never get onto Suou seriously again.

The blue light sparkled.

When he came to his senses, Shiotsu's sword which had jumped up was hitting his shoulder. Kusanagi, who had completely gotten lost in thought, was cut quite deeply. He clenched his teeth at the sharp pain running through his shoulder. Just a moment later, blood came spurting out. In response to the pain that now also held heat, for some reason his head actually cooled off.

He couldn't put pressure on the wound and didn't put distance between the two of them, instead Kusanagi just clicked his tongue and sharply lifted his leg. His toes hit Shiotsu's sword wrist. He felt bone shattering. Shiotsu's saber flew from his hand. Kusanagi then swung that same leg. His heel dug into Shiotsu's temple. He stomped on Shiotsu's chest, and pointed the lighter at his head like a gun. At the same time, Shiotsu's sword stuck itself in the wall with a thud.

The blood from Kusanagi's shoulder stained his shirt red. Both him and Shiotsu were breathing hard. Enduring their slowly spreading pain, they glared at each other.

After a while, the venom left Shiotsu's eyes, and as though to show he no longer had any desire to fight, he relaxed his body. Kusanagi's expression twisted as he looked down at that, and responded quietly to Shiotsu's earlier taunt.

“...it’s an advisor’s job to consider the worst case scenarios too, right?”

“You’re so admirable.” Said Shiotsu in a tone that could have been sarcastic or serious, it was hard to tell.

“Relax... you won’t turn into me.” He looked up at Kusanagi with narrowed eyes.

There was no murderous intent left in Shiotsu’s body. Losing even the slightest venom, he looked even older, and yet even as he was enduring pain, there was something peaceful about the look in his eyes.

“I lose.”

Suou and Totsuka found the elevator leading down deeper and get on it. A worker they grabbed shared his pass with them. Suou was still silent, had his hands stuck in his pockets, and was so relaxed you wouldn’t know he was in the middle of enemy territory.

“I wonder if Kusanagi-san’s okay.”

“Don’t worry.”

Being told that by Suou in a calm way, like it was just a matter of course,

Totsuka smiled wryly.

“You really trust him.”

Of course, Totsuka trusted him too. But, when he thought of how Kusanagi came home from visited Scepter 4's base looking tired, somehow, it bothered him a little. The elevator reached its destination slowly. With the heavy sound of machinery stopping, its doors opened.

With a thud, the sound and blast from an explosion flowed in through the gap in the doors like a rapid river. Totsuka narrowed his eyes, but Suou didn't tense up in the slightest, and simply canceled out the blast with red power that softly left his body. Suou's power and the blast rammed into each other and made a noise that practically shook the whole Center while burning the walls and floor around them. Smoke began to fill that floor.

“Huh?”

In a situation where he had been blasted by a powerful energy with no warning, Suou twisted his neck and let out a noise that could even be considered a bit sleepy.

What happened just then was not caused by the power of a blue clansman. In the first place, it was hard to think that someone with this much power was still

being held in reserve in Scepter 4. But Suou didn't think too deeply about that and just stepped out into the floor. Totsuka followed silently.

When they left the box of the elevator and stepped on the ground, a sharp cutting attack sliced through the air towards them from a different direction. It was a sharp blade sticking out from the smoke still surrounding them. Suou looked at that out of the corner of his eye, then blocked it with one arm.

Using a fist holding red power, he lightly threw the blade aside, and- well, in the first place, if someone thought normally then a blade and a bare hand shouldn't be exchanging blows, but this was done so casually and naturally that one may have begun to think it was normal- and then he knocked aside the blade that was trying to cut them. After that, he roughly reached out and tried to grab the wrist of the attacker who was holding that blade.

However, as Suou tried to grab the attacker, their movements changed. They became faster, as though they were in a video being fast-forwarded. They slipped away from Suou's hand, even though they seemed to be completely caught. The attacker straightened up in midair, landed for just a moment to kick the ground again, and jumped up like a grasshopper. They hit the wall once, then flew off and away directly afterwards, putting a wide space between them and Suou. It took about 0.5 seconds. The smoke was beginning to clear.

“That was close, that was close. I was about to get crushed to death all of a sudden.”

The attacker with a sword and movements like a grasshopper said that while letting out a breath.

“But anyway, they sure are making us go too far.” Said the man of small stature from the opposite side of the attacker. His hand held a powerful energy, and it was shining while letting off crackles that made it seem like it could explode at any second. It was probably this man who had attacked as soon as the elevator doors opened.

“Going too far was part of the job description, wasn’t it... there’s no way they’d /let us off/ for our crimes if it wasn’t something dangerous.” Said the attacker with the sword.

Thump, thump, with heavy footsteps, a large man came walking slowly in from the front, where the smoke hadn’t finished clearing yet.

“...are you guys gonna fight with the red king t’get out of here.” Said the large man. He was a head taller than Suou, and was wrapped in thick, armorlike muscles. However, his blue eyes alone shone strangely in a strangely childlike way.

“Of course. Why else would anyone cross such a dangerous bridge?” The attacker with the sword looked exasperated and glanced at the large man like he was seeing something creepy.

“M'different. Right now,” The big man laughed. With a body made of muscles like bronze, and letting off a sinister murderous intent, his smile was still strangely innocent.

“-My heart's dancing.”

The large man kicked off from the floor. His great body flew straight through the air like an arrow. With the sound of cutting through the air, the next second he was in front of Suou. The man punched Suou from right in front of him.

“Heh...” Suou didn't move an inch as he blocked the man's fist and smirked a bit enjoyably. He raised his arm and with a light movement, he threw off the man's arm which was trying to break Suou's barrier. The man's fist ended up being deflected into the wall. It made a hole. It wasn't as though the wall was destroyed- it was a clean hole, about the size of the man's face.

“A Strain, huh.” Said Suou as he looked around at the ones surrounding them. Looking around, the floor was a wide hall, which led off into multiple mazelike turns.

“...I guess they’re the dangerous Strains kept accomodated down here, huh.”
Said Totsuka while tilting his head.

“Seems like they’ve been told they’ll be let free if they beat the red king, or something.”

Suou didn’t care about what was being said. The man who had assaulted Suou from the front and left a pretty little hold int he wall stood up with a sway.

“M’different. They gave me their offer, sure, but the reason why m’here is cause the chance to fight with the red king itself is a prize to me.” As he said that, the large man’s eyes sparkled like those of a child.

“That guy’s the man called ‘Senkouki’.” Said the attacker with the sword.

“His crime’s murder. He’s also called the 'Strain-killer’. He’s a perv who can’t have fun with anything but fighting strong people.”

'Senkouki' was wearing an innocent smile that didn’t match his looks or the introduction he was just given. Power focused on his arm, and it was clear that he was putting power into his fist again. The little man with crackling white energy in his hand glanced at 'Senkouki’.

“Don’t jump in alone. As much as I hate to say it, we don’t have a chance if

we're not in this together.”

“It's like the 'Pyrotechnician', says!” The attacker with the sword jumped. He leaped like he was on springs. His sword sparkled, and was swung down at Suou's head. Suou messily waved his right arm as though to shake that off. The power surrounding Suou's arm turned to flame and tried to swallow up the attacker.

However, he sped up again. With speed that may have made him look like he up and vanished to the eyes of a normal person, the attacker twisted around in mid air, dodged the lump of flames, bounced off the wall, and jumped towards Suou's side. With his speed, all of that took only an instant, and Suou ended up letting the attacker get into his space and try to cut. But Suou's arm just blocked the sword.

As if it was a pair of swords hitting each other, the attacker's blade and Suou's arm exchanged hits. Normally, Suou would have lost his wrist. However, his arm was holding off the blade without a single scratch. The blade went red hot as it took Suou's power.

“Outta the way, 'Grasshopper'!”

The attacker pressed his sword at the same time as that voice, and using that

action he jumped again. Again, it was so quick it may as well have been instantaneous. As 'Grasshopper' jumped so quickly he practically vanished, white energy went flying towards Suou. It was power unleashed by the man called the 'Pyrotechnician'. Suou knocked away with one hand that ball of energy, which was crackling and like a bomb.

When he knocked it away, that ball of energy let off a violent flash and scattered. Suou's eyes were burned for a moment. In that moment when his eyes were blacked out, from beyond the light, 'Senkouki' came flying. His right hand tried to make a hole in the middle of Suou's body. Suou stopped that with his palm. 'Senkouki's' fist, which always left a circle on whatever it was used against. Having taken that, Suou's palm stung. Because of 'Senkouki's' charge, he slid back just a little.

Suou strongly threw away the fist he had blocked. 'Senkouki' spun as he went flying, but he dextrously straightened his great body up in midair and landed. Suou looked down at the palm he used to block. There was a small black abrasion on the skin. He smirked. He was having a bit of fun.

“Hey.”

While looking in the direction of the Strains, Suou spoke to Totsuka behind him.

“/Can I?”

When he was asked in a faintly cheerful voice, Totsuka shrugged his shoulders.

“...if you’ll be with me when Kusanagi-san gets on to us later?”

He said that in a tone that had exasperation mixed in, making Suou laugh voicelessly.

The next instant, power shot out from his body.

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The blue clansman Kamamoto picked up and threw far away was the last. All of the clansmen protecting the Center had been defeated by Homura, and were escaping.

Now then, what should they do from here on.

Should they follow King and company into the Center-

When Kamamoto turned to Yata to discuss it with him, he noticed people running out from inside the Center. He thought they were reinforcements and

readied himself, but soon realized that that didn't seem to be the case. On the faces of those running out was a the look of someone who had no idea what was going on, and of the anxiousness of someone who still felt they were in danger and wanted to escape. It was probably Strains from the Center. Kamamoto found a face he recognized within them.

“Ah, you!”

It was the boy they questioned when they infiltrated the Center. The boy also seemed to recognize Kamamoto and pointed at him with an 'ah!'.

“It was you guys after all, huh!” The boy ran over.

“What the heck is going on, seriously. You guys are the red clan, right? Are you attacking the Center?”

“We came to save a little girl.” Said Kamamoto while puffing up his chest as though to stick his big stomach out.

“Did you guys run out without permission?”

“Well, yeah... it looked like things were getting bad, and thinking about it, I didn't really feel like trusting the Center and staying put...” As the boy spoke, red light shot out above the building. From amid the sparking light, the form of a

sword appeared. At the same time, a great presence that was both familiar to and shook the souls of Kamamoto and company swelled beneath the blade.

-It's Mikoto-san.

Kamamoto felt the hair all over his body stand on end. Tension rose from his stomach, and while feeling hyped up he rose a fist to the sky.

“No blood! No bone! No ash!” When he called that out, the members around him lifted their fists and did the same. The voices of Homura resounded through the Center's courtyard. The Strain boy looked surprised at Kamamoto, who was shaking with a tension that made him feel like running off.

“Ah.” Abruptly, the boy looked off into the distance and made a weird noise. Kamamoto felt like he had had water splashed on his party a bit, so he went 'what' while looking in the same direction in an annoyed way.

“Ah!” The voice Kamamoto raised was much louder and full of surprise.

In the corner of the path from the Center to the courtyard was the form of a woman standing around with a shocked look on her face. Perhaps she had run all the way there, she was breathing hard and there was sweat on her pale skin.

“Nee-san!” It was Honami.

“Nee-san! Why are you here!” Kamamoto ran over to Honami while speaking accusingly towards her. It looked like Honami was barely paying attention to him, as she was focused on the situation in the courtyard.

“What... is going on here...”

The armed members of Homura raising their voices in victory, and the crushed blue clansmen. The escaping Strains. And above it all, a great sword. She watched in shock.

“Nee-san, I’m sorry. We’ll explain later, so...” Kamamoto anxiously tried to move Honami to a safe place, as suddenly, a human shadow appeared over him. Honami also noticed and looked up at the shadow’s owner. She froze. Kamamoto also shuddered. At both the strangeness of that group’s appearance, and at the fact that he hadn’t noticed their presence at all until they were this close.

It was a group of tall people. They wore strange Japanese clothes, and wore masks above their noses. It was a creepy sort of masks. It had no expression, and had symbol-like things carved everywhere but the eyes. And most noticeably, that mask had two long ears attached to it. Those ears were almost like...

Kamamoto suddenly remembered.

“You guys, you’re 'Rabbits’, huh...”

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Anna shuddered and raised her head.

She had been trying to contact the 'Slate’, but her consciousness was pulled back by the presence of a strong power right nearby. The scientists around her were also making a clouded fuss. Anna remembered his sword of Damocles, which she saw from the top of the ferris wheel, and a beautiful red. As though she were being tempted, Anna picked up one of the red marbles by her hands. She held the small glass sphere between her thumb and forefinger and gently raised it to her left eye.

There were certainly the feeling within her that she wanted to see it once again. And also, the experience of having 'connected’ with Suou once made Anna’s consciousness easily contact with Suou through the red marbles.

Anna saw Suou through the marble.

Suou was smiling. Power that couldn’t be contained within his body was spilling

out as red light and wrapping in circles while spreading out. Anna's eyes, her will, went deeper within Suou. Towards the source of the red shine spilling out of him. What she managed to see was pure red magma. A violent sea of red. The magma boiled and twisted. She figured that anything that touched it would melt away in an instant, it was a terrifying red world.

“...pretty...”

But the one word that escaped Anna's lips was that.

The fearful red world, the world within Suou, charmed Anna. She remembered that time they accidentally 'connected'. She was swallowed by that red sea, and thrown violently around. But what she felt then was certainly not just fear, but also a strange peace of mind. She felt that what she was bottling up inside her so it wouldn't escape was something tiny compared to this. Being wrapped up in a great power like that was something that gave her more relief than anything else until then.

The red sea throbbed heavily, shaking the ground. It was very similar to the 'Slate' Anna had tried to access over and over. But unlike the 'Slate' which rejected her and threw her off, it was a beat that felt welcoming to her. As she felt the sea's beating, she felt her own world spill out. It was different from when she learned the truth behind her parents' deaths and let it go berserk because she

couldn't control it. It was a strangely relaxing feeling of release.

-Mikoto.

The moment after she let herself feel as though she were being gently lifted up, she was gone from inside Suou and back in reality.

At the same time, the world Anna was just looking at spilled out. A violent red light flowed from the marble she had been peeking into. The red light, which held a great energy, shot out from the tiny red point and abruptly spread out into the room. The scientists around her were swallowed up by that light and screamed. They shuddered and fell one after another.

It was just like when Anna had first 'connected' with Suou. Anna stood around in shock in the middle of the room that was suddenly free of observers. She was alone. There was no one to watch her or give her orders. If she wanted to run, she could. This fact shook her. Anna, left all alone in the room, couldn't move for a little while.

"I'll connect with the 'Slate'." Anna told herself what Mizuchi had ordered over and over.

"I'll become the blue king." But, what she should do, and what she must do, steadily began to separate from her heart.

Even though she shouldn't hold hope or expectations, Suou's presence right nearby was shaking Anna.

She took a tiny step back. She turned around. Behind her was a heavy looking metal door. It was a door that had never opened at her will. As though invited, she stepped towards it. When her hand touched it, it sent a chill through her fingers. She grabbed the handle, and pushed.

The door opened easily.

Anna looked out of the open door dumbly. To her, it was the place beyond the cage she couldn't leave, that she must not leave, and she stood motionlessly at the start of that long hallway.

She would connect with the 'Slate'.

She would become the blue king.

Her heart was far from the mission she must complete, but Honami's kind smile floating up in her mind was the thing that dragged her heart back.

...She wanted to be saved.

...She didn't want him to come.

A choked-back voice escaped Anna's lips.

“...Mikoto.”

It was a tiny voice that even she would have trouble hearing.

The next second, the ceiling at the end of the hallway exploded into red.

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Suou suddenly stopped moving and glanced downwards. He went 'hmp'. It was about when 'Senkouki' the Strain was about to lunge at him again. Until a brief moment ago, Suou looked like he was getting ready to take another hit from the front, but as though his mood suddenly changed he just deflected it with his arm, grabbed the guy, and tossed him. A man twice the size of Suou with a metallic weight went lightly flying through the air.

'Senkouki' made a face after he was thrown and noticed Suou looking distracted, and he spun around in the air to land.

“Stop lookin' away, red king.”

Suou didn't even answer 'Senkouki', and was instead looking down.

“Totsuka.” Even though they were in the middle of a battle, he spoke casually to Totsuka.

“Yeah?”

Suou made a 'come here' gesture with his finger, without looking back to Totsuka. Totsuka tilted his head, but went up to Suou.

“Get ready.”

“Huh?”

After he had gotten Totsuka next to him, without a single word of explanation, Suou focused his power directly below him. Red light full of energy spilled out from beneath Suou and hit the ground.

“U, wah...!” Totsuka couldn't help but yelp.

The floor beneath them broke like a chocolate bar when it was hit by Suou's power. A big hole appeared around them and the floor crumbled down to the hallway below. They fell along with it. Suou landed lightly, while Totsuka managed to get down alright thanks to the small red barrier Suou put up around

him.

When they looked up, they saw Anna standing around at the end of the hallway. She looked baffled by the ceiling abruptly breaking and the sudden appearance of Suou and Totsuka.

“I told ya it’d be faster if we just put a hole in the floor.”

Being told that in a slightly triumphant voice, Totsuka looked exasperated.

“That’s not the poi... you know what, never mind.”

Watching the two of them have a relaxed conversation, Anna couldn’t even speak. But her face wasn’t doll-like as before. What was on her face was a clear mix of surprise, and bafflement, and the look of someone who didn’t know what to do. She wanted to go to Suou. But she shouldn’t go to Suou. It was clear that different feelings were struggling within her. Suou and Totsuka got down off the crumbled floor and walked towards Anna. Right then, from the other end of the hallway, a heavy voice resounded.

“Get back, red king.” It was a voice filled with a strong hate.

Turning around, there was a man in a lab coat giving off a golden light from his body with anger in his voice. It was Mizuchi.

“So you’re the guy who was gonna use a brat for stupid stuff.”

In contrast, Suou didn’t have even a hint of an expression like anger on his face. In response to Suou, who looked relaxed, Mizuchi’s fists shook.

“Have you ever even thought about what you’re drawing power from?”

In response to Mizuchi’s words, Suou’s heart didn’t move. Due to his fierce anger, Mizuchi’s expression became uglier.

“You just enjoy your power without a thought... I suppose you’re fine like that. King of destruction, king of violence, king who is but a mere flame to be snuffed out by the wind.”

He spoke with the anger and insult clear in his words.

“But don’t get in my way. There’s no way you, who just swings the power you gained around, would understand, but that 'Slate' has the power to even change humanity’s future. I am going to get near that 'Slate' and discover that power... this experiment performed with Kushina-kun’s assistance is the first step towards that. This is something connected to humanity’s evolution!”

Mizuchi spat those words out in a low growl, while Suou looked on with a

straight face. Totsuka looked up at that face out of the corner of his eye and spoke up.

“You’re not even listening, are you?”

“...my ears can’t pick up on nonsense.”

“How convenient.”

Mizuchi’s fists shook at Suou, who was being blunt, and Totsuka who was so serene. His face turned black with the color of anger.

“Kushina-kun, you understand, yes?”

Anna’s shoulders shook when she heard Mizuchi’s words.

“...return to that room. You should have your own work.”

As though to tie down Anna whose feet were about to back up, Suou’s eyes landed on her.

“Anna.”

Suou called her.

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Don't come here.

The words she had to say stuck in her throat. The thing in front of Anna's eyes was something she couldn't stop with speech. It was a lump of beautiful, red power of the like she had never seen before. The effects of contacting Suou earlier were still left over. She felt the red magma within him from earlier. He soul shuddered.

She felt as though in front of Suou's pressuring powers, any words of hers would be as pointless as shouting at a natural disaster not to come. The red person she had seen through her marble was in front of her now. In Anna's world, which only reflected red, Suou's powerful, fierce red was beautiful, and it had a realisticness comparable to nothing she had felt before.

"Anna."

Suou called her. Anna looked at him as though she were fascinated.

"Come here."

She was ordered shortly.

The next moment, before she could even think, her body had moved.

She ran.

Leaving behind all of her duties, unease, fear, and everything else, she ran to the red that filled her world. As she ran, for some reason, she felt her eyes become blurry. How strange, she couldn't see well. What a shame, since she had such a pretty red in front of her. She ran straight into Suou with the force of her dash. Her face was buried in his leg. He caught her.

“...don't strain yourself for no reason, brat.”

Saying that in a sulky way, Suou's warm hands roughly petted Anna's head once, before he immediately took her by the collar and pulled her away. As she was pulled off, Anna noticed that the place on Suou's leg where she had buried her face was a bit damp. Like a kitten, she was held up by her scruff and shoved at Totsuka.

“Take her.”

Anna, being held protectively by Totsuka, looked up at Suou's back, which was wrapped in red.

From the great hole Suou made, the Strains jumped down. They stood in front of Suou as though to protect Mizuchi.

“I understand, red king. You have great power, but because of its immensity, you cannot use it without limit when someone you cannot harm is in the same place.”

Mizuchi said that as though laughing at him.

“In addition, you’re horribly bad at dealing with it. The same as the previous red king... you’re a clumsy man.”

Suou smiled fearlessly.

It was a dreadful, but pleased smile.

Totsuka looked up at him with his own wry smile. Suou spoke without even looking down at him.

“Stop me.”

“Gotcha.”

Totsuka replied with a fitting casualness to that request, which was said in the tone of someone asking to be woken up in half an hour before taking a nap.

Suou took a step forward. At his feet, sparks scattered. From his body, red light flowed out like rising steam. His eyes took on redness, and white canines peeked out of his grin.

“I’ll burn you all up, down to every last drop of blood, bone, and ash.”

The building shuddered with a thud as light containing red heat spilled out of Suou’s full body and it was surrounded by a ball of fire like the sun.

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The Strains readied themselves all at once and reacted in their own ways.

'Grasshopper', the Strain with a sword, jumped back. He moved like he was on springs, and moved back greatly with but a single jump. He had one hand on the floor, and one on his blade.

'Pyrotechnician', the Strain with powerful energy held in both hands, watched Suou’s attacks carefully and held his hands as though to protect himself. The power in his hands crackled and grew, but his feet were taking him backwards.

In contrast to those two, while 'Senkouki' was getting ready, it wasn’t for the sake of dodging or guarding. In fact, he was getting ready to lunge forward at full power at any moment. His eyes sparkled as he clenched his fist.

“Cool...”

Watching 'Senkouki', who sounded happy, Suou laughed through his nose and took a step forward. As though taking that as a cue, the red fireball surrounding him moved like a living creature. With a roar, it fiercely burned up the air, and that great fireball left Suou's body to lunge forth like a beast aiming to devour 'Senkouki's' body.

Even then, 'Senkouki' didn't try to dodge.

He threw forward his fist, which put holes into everything he went against, into the fire. The power in it dug a hole in the ball of flame. However, that was only a small area around his fist. The next second, his body was swallowed up all at once by the fire.

The body of 'Senkouki', which was still straight even while surrounded in fire, was wrapped in golden light. 'Senkouki' had indeed been burned black by the flames. But that burned flesh was sucked in as if dyed by that golden light, and his dark brown skin returned to its previous color.

Suou frowned slightly, and continued his attack without losing even a little momentum. He hit 'Senkouki's' fist with something like an uppercut. It was a light movement without much movement, but 'Senkouki's' fist was shattered. As

his fist was thrown up, 'Senkouki's' body didn't change its position and went right for Suou again. Suou kicked him as though shoving him away with his foot. 'Senkouki' flew backwards, then bounded on the ground.

However, that body crumpled on the ground like a small mountain was again wrapped in golden light, and without a break, 'Senkouki' got right back up as though nothing had happened. His fist, which should have been shattered, was initially twisted in a weird direction, but as soon as it was sucked up by that golden light, it popped and went back into its previous shape. 'Senkouki', showing no reaction to this on his face, opened and closed the fist Suou just shattered to check how it was. Suou looked behind 'Senkouki'.

“...you, huh.”

He looked at Mizuchi, standing behind the Strains. Mizuchi was sparkling with the same golden light that surrounded 'Senkouki's' body. He looked back at Suou with eyes that shined golden.

“The 'talent' I had drawn out by the golden king is healing and regeneration.”

He announced that in a low voice, then turned his eyes onto 'Senkouki' as though viewing a thing.

“But don't rely on me too much. Avoid unnecessary damage to your body.”

“M'not relying on you or anything.” 'Senkouki' spoke without even glancing at Mizuchi. He only looked at Suou, and his blue eyes sparkled.

“M'name is 'Senkouki'. It's m'job to make straight, pretty holes.”

Mizuchi made a face like he was irritated at a machine malfunctioning, then turned to the remaining two Strains and gave them some sort of short order. Suou glanced at him coldly. Mizuchi noticed.

“Do you see me as unfair? However, they are my weapons. They're my power, I made them myself!”

Mizuchi nearly yelled that, but the Strains didn't react. They committed crimes, were imprisoned here, and were forced to cease being human. Most likely, they had been 'researched' by Mizuchi, or 'altered'. Suou looked at the Strains. With 'Senkouki' at their head, they were all powerful. But he saw a deformation in that power.

“There are certain requirements for raising power. Some needed a certain type of medicine to show effect, others were empowered by surgery. The men here are those results!”

Mizuchi spoke with bloodshot eyes.

“And... they’ve also been /worked on/ so they can receive the effects of my power to the maximum.”

Speaking in a heated way, Mizuchi turned his eyes to Anna.

“There is no end to 'possibility'. Yes, there is no limit to power. As long as there is the 'Slate' ... isn't that right, Kushina-kun.”

Suou's hand twitched slightly. But Mizuchi didn't notice that and continued.

“Just a little more... it would just be a little more. Kushina-kun, you should realize that as well. You've touched the 'Slate'. With just a little more- you would reach what was 'beyond'.”

“Wouldya leave the complicated stuff for later?” Said 'Senkouki'. He was shaking his burnt body.

“M'gonna fight with the red king. M'gonna kill the red king. There's no problem, right?”

Suou looked at 'Senkouki' while feeling like he was looking at a rare animal. He knew Suou was the 'red king', and also correctly knew the extent of his powers, and yet still said that. There had never been any such idiot before. This guy was

certainly an idiot, but he was neither dense nor weak enough to not understand the difference in their strength. 'Senkouki' kicked off from the ground again. He swung down his fist, which had been broken and then restored by Mizuchi's 'regeneration'.

It was a simple, foolish, straightforward attack. An attack that had learned nothing from the previous counter. But the power in that attack had jumped up. Waves of power rose from 'Senkouki's' full body, and the air around him shimmered like a mirage.

He was just a little interested.

Even after taking such a counterattack, instead of being disheartened his eyes instead sparkled with an insane gladness. Before the fist of 'Senkouki' could reach Suou, "Pyrotechnician's" white light flew at him. Suou brushed that sparkling energy away with his arm. It hit the wall and exploded with a burning light. From within that light and blast, 'Senkouki' flew out and aimed for Suou's stomach right after Suou was hit by 'Pyrotechnician'.

Suou caught that hit in his palm. It was true that there was more power than before. In response to the weight and heat pressed into his palm, it was as though the flames in his body were being fueled into increasing their own strength.

Perhaps because he was loosening his chains, even the slightest rise in Suou's feelings was turned directly into power. Flames rose from his palm, and swallowed 'Senkouki's' arm. While normally it would have turned right to ash, it endured it because of 'Senkouki's' power. On top of that, because of Mizuchi's power, it would regenerate as soon as it was burned. 'Senkouki' opened his eyes wide, sweated, and smiled as he felt the hellish pain of having himself be burned alive and regenerated over and over.

From behind 'Senkouki's' great body, 'Grasshopper' suddenly appeared. He leaped over 'Senkouki's' head and attacked from near the ceiling. His sword reflected the red shine of Suou's fire. While still holding off 'Senkouki' with one hand, he raised his left to swat 'Grasshopper' out of the air. He had already figured that the guy used a weird sort of illusion to speed up, so it was a movement that took that into account, but 'Grasshopper' sped up even more than before. Right as he was about to touch Suou's hand, he put a hand on 'Senkouki's' head and flipped behind him to hide at a speed that the human eye couldn't follow.

The moment he could be seen from behind 'Senkouki', Suou shoved back at the large man. The fire biting into 'Senkouki's' arm suddenly grew and covered his whole body, and it went flying wrapped in flame. However, at that point, 'Grasshopper' had already darted away from him and was above Suou.

He thought he would have that sword swung down at him from above, but 'Grasshopper' went above and beyond him. Beyond him, where Anna and Totsuka were. Perhaps he intended to grab Anna and run, or to take a hostage. Without being moved even slightly, Suou jumped backwards lightly. 'Grasshopper' sped up, bounced off the wall, and tried to slip past Suou. After slowing down as if in a feint, he sped up again. He darted in a straight line to Anna and Totsuka.

However, Suou's hand grabbed 'Grasshopper's' head as though snatching up a bug. He waved that hand around in the air and slammed 'Grasshopper' into the wall. 'Grasshopper' fell without raising his voice. Suou landed lightly, lifted that fallen body, and threw it in Mizuchi's direction. Mizuchi barely dodged it. "Pyrotechnician' realized with a start that he was the last one left, but continued on to throw the sparking white energy in both of his hands at Suou. Suou deflected it. It hit the wall and exploded into light and a blast. 'Pyrotechnician's' balls of power kept flying. Suou hit them all back. They were all rather heavy and it was fun.

"Pyrotechnician' was breathing heavily and soaked in sweat after the smoke cleared up from him shooting energy balls like the climax of a fireworks show. He curled up into his already small body, and looked at Suou in despair. Beyond, 'Grasshopper' had been fixed up by Mizuchi, but it was clear that his will to fight had been broken.

Within that, 'Senkouki' alone was unbroken. In fact, he seemed even more eager than earlier.

"You sure are strong." He spoke in a voice that sounded almost drunk, enraptured. His blue eyes shone with a monstrous light. They were eyes that left behind all reality and looked only towards 'the end'. They were eyes drunk in the pleasure of going right up to 'the end' and going over the edge.

Suou took the heat of those eyes and smiled faintly.

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Anna's mind had become very sensitive. The emotions of everyone there were pressing in on her, touching her skin, and informing her of how they felt. 'Grasshopper's' fear, 'Pyrotechnician's' anxiety, Mizuchi's thoughts that became more confused as he was driven into a corner and yet still focused on and desired Anna-

And 'Senkouki's' pleasure from heading towards destruction. Anna found this to be scary. It wasn't a fear towards 'Senkouki' himself. It was his enjoyment of putting himself right at the edge of destruction. It was something also found inside Suou. Anna knew that, and that truth was now raw as it entered her heart. 'Senkouki' was glad from the very bottom of his heart to be fighting Suou. He

didn't have a single worry in his head that he couldn't lose, or that he might die, he only drowned in the thrill of gladness he found in fighting to the death which shook his heart and body.

'Senkouki's' attack was deflected by Suou, dodged, and countered. As this was repeated, 'Senkouki' would fall and be revived over and over by Mizuchi, then stand again. Then there would be even more power in his fist than the previous time. The more he was beaten, the more his life was threatened, the more power 'Senkouki' held. Suou was also playing. He was enjoying going against 'Senkouki'. He seemed to be interested in seeing how far 'Senkouki's' power could go, and also looked to be sharing in 'Senkouki's' enjoyment.

The skin of 'Senkouki's' arm was torn and blood spurted out. He was over capacity. The power he wielded was beyond his body's limits. Anna knew what kind of treatment the Strains experimented on here received. Compared to them, Anna knew her own treatment had been quite gentle. The dangerous, criminal Strains had no contact with the outside aside from the examinations done by the 'Rabbits'. Anna, knowing that there were other Strains nearby being forced into experiments, had 'seen' them through her powers before. She may have been hoping for comfort by knowing that there was someone worse off than her. However, what she saw hurt her deeply.

It was, indeed, the manufacturing of weapons using humans as a material. The

dangerous criminal Strains were forced to throw away their names as people, given codenames after their powers, and only recognized for their abilities. Then they were put through all kinds of experiments to raise their level.

That wasn't all.

They were also used as material for helping Mizuchi reach the limits of his own power. The power for healing and regeneration. They were first given Mizuchi's blood. Then, holding his blood as a part of his body within their own, since that was the state they were most easily affected in, /they had their bodies destroyed/. In response to the agony Anna felt through her power, she shivered and vomited a little. Those men had their bodies destroyed, then they were recovered using Mizuchi's power. At first it was a slow, tedious process of recovery. However, as soon as they recovered, the whole thing was repeated. When that happened, the healing went a bit faster. Their bodies got used to Mizuchi's power, and learned how to recover using it.

Anna didn't know how many times that process was repeated until the recovery became something that would only take a moment. However, that hellish scene that Mizuchi repeated over and over without any sort of hate or resentment planted a deep fear of him within her.

'There is a higher level of power.'

Said Mizuchi kindly when Anna failed to contact the 'Slate'.

'I've drawn out the power of many Strains. What's important is finding the key to releasing their limiters.'

Said Mizuchi as he stroked the burn on Anna's arm put there for the sake of sharpening her power. Anna's sore skin was surrounded by golden light, and the pain vanished. It turned back to its previous pale, smooth state from being burnt red and black.

'I've also studied my own power for many years... they say the first king, the silver king's element is 'immortality'. If I were to draw my own power out to the limit, could I not also reach that level? Limitless recovery. That would be no different from 'immortality'.'

Mizuchi looked down at his hands, opened his eyes wide, and whispered as though talking to himself.

'This is not my limit. 'Possibilities' are always open. Until now, I've even drawn out my powers, and found ways to use it. This isn't all. There is still more. More, more, more...!'

Mizuchi, who had been talking to his own palms, suddenly raised his head. He

looked around, then turned the smile stuck to his face towards Anna.

'Everything will begin after solving the mysteries of the 'Slate'. The first and greatest key is held by you, Kushina-kun.'

"Kushina-kun!"

Anna heard the voice of Mizuchi in her memories and in reality in harmony. She looked up with a start. Mizuchi was soaked in sweat and shaking as he stared at her. Because he kept recovering 'Senkouki' who tirelessly went against Suou despite being destroyed over and over, he was reaching his limit. The golden light he let off would sometimes flicker like a dying lightbulb. He breathed harshly, his eyes were sunken, his hair was in disarray, and he seemed to have aged a decade or two. The smile he always had on had vanished like it was never there at all, and was replaced by a scary expression, and he stared at Anna as though he still wouldn't let go of clinging to her despite the situation.

"Don't betray me! You will become king. I will become your first vassal! I will serve you, support you, lead you, and eventually force you up into the golden king's position as manager of the 'Slate'!"

Anna looked back at Mizuchi silently. Standing and wavering amid the waves of heat coming from Suou, he had a face like a monster.

“Weren’t you prepared to become king for Kushina Honami’s sake?!”

When Mizuchi said Honami’s name, Totsuka’s arms, which had been holding Anna protectively, tightened.

“Don’t waver, okay?”

Totsuka said that to her in a soft voice that didn’t suit the situation. Anna nodded her head a bit.

“Okay.”

Within this place that was filled with a storm of emotions, Totsuka’s feelings alone were calm. By leaning against him, Anna’s heart was also able to steady itself. Anna watched Suou and ‘Senkouki’ fight as if dancing. ‘Senkouki’s’ tension and pleasure reached her. His skin was ripping under his own power, his muscles were being hardened into strange shapes, and his body was near destruction, but his heart left that body behind and only desired his battle with Suou.

The other two Strains twisted their faces and watched ‘Senkouki’ from behind. They no longer had any will to participate in this fight. Nothing but destruction awaited ‘Senkouki’. However, his power and heart, which had long been caged away, were allowed to fly freely right now. To him, this battle was not a test to

obtain freedom. It WAS his 'freedom'.

And right now, in Suou, she could /feel something like desire/.

...Mikoto's world spilled out.

Anna's two eyes 'saw' the world inside Suou. The sea of magma within him fiercely twisted, changed shape, and became a big, sleek beast. That beast reacted to its enemy's insane charge by bearing its fangs.

Anna's heart was stolen by that beautiful, red form that was only a step away from being released- she wouldn't hesitate to call it the most beautiful creature in the world.

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He reacted to the smell of blood.

Once he had let the chains loose once, he would be melted away by the seduction of the flames rising from within him. It felt like his mind was numbed. It was the staggering pleasure of letting loose the power he had always been holding back since becoming king.

'Senkouki' was also smiling. His insides were crushed and then recovered again and again. Every time, he let out an immense amount of blood, and he continued to smile as his eyes shone like a little boy's as his chest and mouth were sullied. His skin was burned and recovered over and over. Even as he let out a beastly roar in response to the heat and pain, he still lunged straight forward.

What a crazy bastard, he thought.

But he also felt like responding to that madness.

“Gaaaaaaaaaahh!” 'Senkouki' howled. It was no longer a voice that could be thought human, it was a howl like he was vomiting his life up from his belly. Suou swung his red fist.

Until now, there had never been someone who could fight with Suou personally. Suou was a king. As a king, if he had just held that power and /existed/, that was good enough. There was no one he should fight- no one anywhere he could use his powers against and fight. It wasn't as though this Strain would become that person. However, he was a weirdo who knew Suou's power, and even then continued to go at him, and the thing within him that was about to burn away felt like what Suou had always been wanting for.

Suou's fist and 'Senkouki's' fist collided head on. With a heavy roar, waves of

impact spread out. It was the impact of two powerful energies. The waves of impact spread out and instantly left crevices in the walls, the floor, the ceiling surrounding them. Suou didn't notice, but those crevices spread out all the way to the top of the Center. 'Senkouki's' fist left a beautiful round circle in what he hit. It was not a rough form of destruction. However, when that fist of his, his weapon, collided with Suou's, the next moment it went flying.

'Senkouki' shrieked. However, even then, the light didn't vanish from his eyes. Those sparkling, childlike blue eyes watched Suou. That right arm of his was wrapped in golden light and began to regenerate. 'Senkouki' didn't wait for it to finish and clenched his left fist. Putting power into it, he swung it upwards like a drill, using a destructive power. If he did that, he'd only lose his left arm as well. However, he didn't seem to care. He would use up all of his power. He burned up his own thoughts until his head was pure white, he would let everything loose, and he would reach the end. 'Senkouki's' childlike blue eyes that didn't suit his body were only looking at what was beyond that point.

Suou may have been pulled along by those eyes, and by how insanely intoxicated he was by the battle. Suou himself was feeling a strange momentum due to letting loose just a little of the power he had long held down. The flow inside him that had been held by a chain kept spilling out as soon as he had let his bonds loosen. It felt nice to let it go. It gently melted his brain and led him on. The red light wrapped around Suou's body changed into a flame with

physical power. The floor was becoming like a red sea and filled with Suou's fire.

The walls began to turn to ash in response to that ridiculous heat, and the metal door began to melt. The ceiling burned and fell, and fragments rained down. 'Senkouki' watched this as if fascinated, but the other two Strains whimpered and ran away. They jumped up and away by kicking off from the ground of the floor which was becoming a burning hell. Mizuchi stared at Suou with a twisted expression and shouted.

“Are you going to destroy everything, red king!? You'll destroy yourself!”

Destruction.

Suou smiled faintly.

Right then, something cool was pressed against the center of his back.

“King.”

It was Totsuka's palm. Even within this situation, he called Suou with a serene voice.

Maybe Totsuka's hand was cold, or perhaps Suou's body had heated up too

much, or maybe it was both. Thanks to that hand's feeling and temperature, a calm came upon the crazed power within his body.

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He was charmed by the color of his flame.

As he watched the flames filling the floor, the voices of Suou and Kusanagi rang in Totsuka's head.

-Stop me.

-You're the stopper.

That was probably his role, the one who had almost no combat ability within Homura. However, sometimes, there were moments when he thought it would be bliss to just stand and watch that back go forth, without tying it here.

Totsuka smiled bitterly, just a little, then looked down at Anna, who he was holding close in his arms. Her eyes were wide, and she was looking around at the fiery floor. The light of the flames danced on her white skin. Her large eyes reflected that fiery shine and sparkled. She was fascinated by the flow of power from Suou and let out a sigh.

“It’s pretty.”

“Yeah.”

“...but.”

“I know.” Totsuka smiled and let Anna go.

“Stay close.” Anna looked up at Totsuka and blinked. Then she did as she was told and followed after him.

Totsuka and Anna were protected by a barrier put up by Suou, and regardless Suou’s flames would never burn Totsuka. Totsuka had hardly any combat ability. His power was also particularly weak. However, he was able to use it ‘delicately’.

In return for being weaker than anyone else, he was able to be most in tune with his comrades’ flame. Totsuka would never, ever be harmed by Suou’s fire, or the power the members of Homura had received from him.

As he watched the fierce flow of power that spilled out of Suou and raved around, Totsuka leisurely approached him from behind.

One step. Two steps.

It was so hot that if a defenseless civilian had been here, they would have died with their blood boiling within an instant, but Totsuka walked right through it. Right as the waves of heat were about to touch him, they lost their danger and became a soft warm breeze. As he approached Suou's back, he directed his consciousness towards the small ember within himself. It was small, and it was weak. However, it was certainly a flame he had received from Suou.

The third king- the red king held the nature called the king of wild flames. The red clansmens' powers were also a wild power... a nature that could easily come to love violence and drown in power should they take one wrong step. Those like Kusanagi had their abilities completely under their control, but being able to use it with a cool face was his specialty. Even Kusanagi knew the seduction of drowning in power.

However, Totsuka didn't know it.

If the rest of Homura held bonfires within their bodies, then the flame held by Totsuka was but the light of a candle. Totsuka wouldn't be able know the pleasure of holding power, or the pressure of it.

All he could do was call them from the outside.

Totsuka's hand touched Suou's back. It was hot. Suou's body heat and the heat of the flame escaping that body was mixing together. Totsuka synchronized the small fire inside him and Suou's flame that was like the Niagara falls. In the beginning, they were both the same fire.

Of course, Totsuka wouldn't be able to control Suou's flame. However, he was able to reach him.

“King.”

Totsuka called Suou.

At the same time, the waves of heat that flowed from Suou's body, and the sea of fire filling the floor quieted, and they vanished. Suou easily held back the dangerous flame that seemed like it would destroy them all.

Totsuka took his hand from Suou's back.

Suou, who had until just a moment ago been creating a hellish scene, ran his fingers through his hair and let out a sigh like he had just woken up. In front of him was 'Senkouki', who was beaten up.

'Senkouki's' arm was still not recovered, his body was burnt up, and he was in a state that it was a mystery how he managed to stand. Golden light softly covered

him. If one were to look into the distance, Mizuchi was shining gold and trying as hard as he could to fill 'Senkouki' with power. Until a moment ago, he had been struggling to protect himself from the heat and hadn't been able to work on 'Senkouki'. However, that light was weak, and it was barely having any effect. Even then, Mizuchi yelled, spraying spit.

“Fight! Battle is your reason for existing, isn't it? You're a murderer who killed so many Strains, I've let you live and empowered, killer. You're my weapon. A weapon's meaning is only found on the battlefield! Now, fight!”

'Senkouki' continued to show a will to fight, though it probably wasn't because Mizuchi told him to. He lifted up his left arm, then tried to fill it with what little was left of his power.

“...what are you gonna do.” Suou said roughly.

'Senkouki's' blue eyes still shone purely, childishly. He even looked happy.

“Isn't it obvious? M'gonna go. Until the end.”

Suou understood what 'Senkouki' meant by 'the end'. He approached 'Senkouki'. His fist was lightly pressed against 'Senkouki's' heart with a thump.

“No blood. No bone. No ash.” Suou said that in a whisper, in a voice that was a

little hoarse, a little sweet. It sounded like an epitaph. The next moment, 'Senkouki's' body slowly bent. It caused a heavy thud as it fell. The red power released from Suou's fist had burnt 'Senkouki's' heart out from the inside.

A Strain fascinated by battle killed some people, was caught, was turned into a weapon, then reached 'the end' of battle... that was all.

Burnt fragments came raining down from above. Even though Suou had stopped the flow of his power, the building had still been damaged earlier and was reaching its limit. The torn walls were making dangerous noises, and they as well as the ceiling were quietly burning. Within that, Suou looked over at Mizuchi. He trembled as if hell itself was glaring at him.

“...You... don't you want to know the source of that great power of yours?” He spoke as he backed away.

Suou had already sealed away his power and was simply just standing there. However, Mizuchi was sweating all over and his legs were shivering.

“Do you know that Strains are all called 'would-be kings'? I've studied Strains, and by coming closer to kings, I've tried to pursue the 'Slate's' secrets. This is a study of the truth!”

Suou sighed at Mizuchi's desperation. He slowly walked towards the other guy.

“Is one child’s freedom as important as the truth!? I haven’t threatened her life, nor did I intend to! All I used up was criminal Strains who didn’t have a right to live in the first place! I...”

“You can shut up now.”

Suou replied to Mizuchi’s near shouting in a low voice. His right arm glowed red. Mizuchi squeaked and gasped... and suddenly his body floated into the air.

“Wha...”

Mizuchi thrashed around in midair. Then he was thrown to the ground in front of Suou, who was watching with a raised eyebrow. Mizuchi lost consciousness without a word. Suou turned around and looked up at the one who had flung Mizuchi.

They were around the hole in the ceiling. Their clothes were strange and appeared to be based on kariginu, and half of their faces were covered by creepy masks. Those masks had long, beastly ears. Suou snorted in a displeased way.

“...The 'Rabbits', huh.” The golden king’s guard.

Within the golden clansmen, the 'rabbits' were a completely special existence.

The golden clan's installation where each person's 'talent' was drawn out to the extreme. Amid that, there are some who received supernatural powers, and others who only had what civilians would call 'talent' drawn out to the extreme. And also, there were those who hardly had anything drawn out at all and had their own lack of talent thrown in their faces.

The 'rabbits' were a group of those who received top class abilities. They were a group who wore the same outfit and the same masks, making it impossible to tell them apart, but within them there were a countless number of those who had combat power that would beat even the strongest clansmen from other clans. The only one who knew their identity and their numbers was the golden king himself. And those 'rabbits' were now jumping lightly down from the great hole to land on the ruins below. Actually, it couldn't be said that they jumped. They floated through the air, and softly reached the ground. There was probably someone within them who could move things about with their power. It was likely the same power that smacked Mizuchi a moment ago.

There were three 'rabbits'. All of them were tall. A great power could be sensed within them, but that presence was quiet.

"Seems like they came for the cleanup." A familiar voice came from above.

Looking up, Kusanagi who had probably been behind the 'rabbits' was standing

at the edge of the hole and looking down.

“Yo, good work.” Kusanagi waved one hand at Suou from where he stood. He had gotten his shoulder and arm dealt with, but his shirt was still all bloody. Suou saw that and frowned.

“What’s with that look?”

“...you don’t need to point that out first thing in a situation like this. Leave me be. It’s actually pretty embarrassin’.” Kusanagi looked at Mizuchi and smiled wryly.

“The chief layin’ over there is done for. You don’t need to deal with him anymore. Let the ‘rabbits’ have him.”

Suou didn’t reply, but he didn’t try to stop the moving ‘rabbits’. They went by him and surrounded Mizuchi. Kusanagi jumped down. Totsuka ran over to him, holding Anna’s hand.

“You okay? You hardly ever get hurt like this. What happened, seriously?”

“...like I said, don’t ask...” Kusanagi looked awkward, then suddenly glared at both Totsuka and Suou.

“More importantly, I told you guys not to go overboard, right? What’s this?”

The building was full of huge fissures and was beginning to fall apart as it burned. Even now, small fragments were falling from above, and unpleasant noises heralding destruction could be heard. Totsuka smiled as if to change the subject.

“Ahaha... looks like we’re gonna get buried alive if we don’t get out quick.”

“Jeez... the Strains above ground have already run away. Right now, Scepter 4’s leader is sending out evacuation orders to the workers and blues still inside.” Kusanagi’s expression as he said that was complicated. Suou looked at that silently, then looked up.

“...two Strains ran away a minute ago.”

“Another 'rabbit' grabbed them. The 'rabbits' should be taking out the other Strains down here in the basement now.”

Let’s get on out too, Kusanagi said while looking down at Anna who was holding Totsuka’s hand.

“You’re with us, right?”

Kusanagi spoke to Anna as though treating her as an equal, not a child. She nodded. Totsuka pulled their connected hands and let her go, so she could go to Suou instead.

For a few seconds, Anna looked up at Suou in an unsure way... then she gently took his sleeve.

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“Ah! Mikoto-san!”

When he saw Suou and company come out of the cracked, burning Center, Yata’s expression sparkled and he raised his voice. Fushimi looked up when he heard Yata’s voice and looked over.

Suou, Kusanagi, and Totsuka. And behind Suou, Anna was holding on to his clothes. Her own blue clothes were dirty, but she seemed to be safe. Fushimi let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding in.

As Suou and company left it, the Center finally began to collapse. It didn’t take long for it to finish after it began. It fell apart as if sinking, and the hallway connecting it to the hospital also broke off. The research facility turned to

garbage, and it burned.

The members of Homura and the members of Scepter 4 who were treating those injured, the Center's workers, and the escaped Strains all watched in silence. Within that, Yata alone paid no attention to the destruction and happily ran to Suou. Fushimi noticed and clicked his tongue. Totsuka said something to Yata as he approached, then looked behind Yata, and caught Fushimi's eye. Totsuka smiled and went over.

Fushimi clicked his tongue again.

“Good work.”

“...thanks.” Fushimi replied in a sulky way to Totsuka's smiling words.

“Anna-chan's just fine.”

“...why are you telling me.”

Totsuka shrugged a little. Fushimi glanced at him out of the corner of his eye.

“...so, what happened?”

“The Center's chief, Mizuchi, got taken away by the 'rabbits'. The goldens will

probably deal with him... the building's like this, so I guess the Center's done for for the moment."

There would soon be another facility for educating Strains, probably. But it's after this whole mess. They would have to be sensitive towards problems. Fushimi looked up at the flaming mountain of ruin, then spoke softly.

"The 'rabbits' got here late."

"Yep, they sure did."

"I wonder if they wanted to see the end of Mizuchi's experiment first." When he said that as if he didn't care, Totsuka smiled wryly and said 'maybe'.

What, exactly, is the 'Slate'. Certainly it wasn't only Mizuchi who was searching for that answer. Totsuka and Fushimi stood next to each other and watched the flames, when several members of Homura came up to talk to Totsuka. Totsuka replied cheerfully, and gave some orders. The members listened obediently and moved to follow those commands. Fushimi watched out the corner of his eye, then felt kinda uncomfortable.

"I guess we need to leave soon. Saru-kun, we should-"

"Why are you an executive of Homura even though you're so weak?" The words

he had always thought of but never said out loud came spilling out, maybe because of all the stress he had felt today.

Totsuka's eyes widened. Fushimi thought he'd finally get scolded, and that he might feel a bit better if he saw the guy who was always laughing get angry at having his pride hurt. However, once Totsuka got over his surprise at the sudden question, he just smiled as usual.

“Coincidence!”

Fushimi lost his voice in response to that truly cheery tone.

“...well, that might be saying too much, but I've just been hanging around King ever since he was in highschool. When he became king, me and Kusanagi were nearby, so, well, I guess it just happened?”

Even if that was the case at first, within a team where it could be said that strength was everything, the fact that Totsuka could remain in that seat without question and was even looked up to was probably his specialty.

“...you might actually be suited to be king, too.” When Fushimi said that in a cynical mood, Totsuka went 'wha' and widened his eyes.

“Even if you don't control them with power, they follow you... it's special, isn't

it.”

“You shouldn’t say something so stupid.” He was still smiling, but Totsuka’s voice was serious. Fushimi frowned questioningly and looked at him. Totsuka was smiling, but it wasn’t his usual friendly smile, and it seemed even cruel.

“A guy who’s obsessed with something can’t become a king.”

Because he said it while looking so straight at Fushimi, Fushimi felt uncomfortable. Even though they were supposed to be talking about Totsuka, he’s the one who felt awkward. He ended up shutting up for several seconds as he considered his response, then finally just turned away with a click of his tongue.

“I don’t get what you’re talking about.”

He said that quietly, and Totsuka grinned. That expression had returned to his usual smile, and it just annoyed Fushimi further.

“I hate you.”

“Oh? I actually kind of like you, Saru-kun.”

“.....please stop calling me that.” He accidentally said that childishly. Totsuka

looked surprised for a moment, then smiled in a way that was half teasing, half glad.

“...you finally said what you wanted to, Fushimi.”

When Fushimi opened his mouth to respond, he heard the members of Homura behind him make a fuss.

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Hearing other members make a fuss from a ways off, Yata looked around.

“Kamamoto-san!?”

A member of Homura yelled that worriedly, and it reached Yata’s ears. His expression tensed and he ran over.

In the shadow of the hospital which was a little ways off from the earlier battlefield, Kamamoto’s large, fallen body and the familiar Strain boy sitting next to him, and the surrounding members of Homura entered his sight.

“Kamamoto!”

When Yata knelt next to him and lifted him up, Kamamoto moaned and

opened his eyes. Yata grabbed his collar and dragged his face close.

“Hey! What’s wrong!?”

“Huh... Yata-san.”

“Whaddya mean, Yata-san!? Why are you collapsed over here!? Did they get you?!” Kamamoto looked confused as he sat up, then looked around.

“No, I’m not... actually, what was I doing...”

“I dunno! Did you hit your head or something!?”

Kamamoto turned around and around, scratched his head, then suddenly his expression changed and he went 'ah!'.

“That’s right! Kushina-neesan was...!”

Hearing that, Yata’s expression changed.

“Something happened to nee-san!?” When he asked in a shout without realizing, everyone in the courtyard turned.

Suou and Anna were behind Yata. Hearing Honami’s named, Anna’s eyes wavered. She clenched the hand holding on to Suou’s clothing, so that her small

knuckles turned white. Anna watched Kamamoto while her eyelashes wavered.

“...what happened.” Suou asked in a deep voice in Anna’s place.

Kamamoto looked back and forth between the two of them while his meaty face shivered and replied.

“Kushina-neesan is...”

Interval 5

If you were to look at Totsuka from a bystander's point of view, his past isn't a very happy one. He doesn't remember his real parents' faces. When Totsuka was three years old, he was apparently told "Wait right here" and abandoned in a park.

He was adopted by the childless couple who first spoke to him, but the husband of that couple was hopelessly fond of gambling, so his wife lost her love for him and left. When that happened, Totsuka wasn't taken along, and was left with his pathetic adoptive father.

Knowing those circumstances, most people make very sympathetic faces. But that's off the mark. Totsuka doesn't particularly feel anything towards the fact that he was apparently abandoned. He didn't resent the parents who threw him away, nor did he particularly want to meet them. It wasn't as though he felt resigned, it was simply that he very casually accepted the situation with the feeling that "Well, lots of things happen in life".

To Totsuka, this world was so filled to the brim with interesting things that a bit of trouble surrounding his past wasn't enough to make him feel unhappiness. Totsuka, who was interested in everything, knew of more games that cost nothing than anyone else. He could play all sorts of songs on the trashlike

harmonica from his home and was good at catching kabuto beetles. His house was small, but he had a secret base made of a main building and two vacation homes. He also became absorbed in all the different kinds of games you can play with a single ball and ran around with the neighborhood children.

His gamble-loving “father” was truly hopeless as both a husband and a father, but if Totsuka thought of him as a bad friend then it wasn’t bad. Sometimes the man would wander off and leave their home and not come back for weeks on end, but Totsuka would just understand it as “He got invited away by the wind again, didn’t he” when that happened. After a while, the father would come back, give Totsuka a cheap souvenir and take him out to play as though trying to apologize. He’d take him to a nearby mountain. Mountain climbing was a young Totsuka’s favorite hobby.

There were plenty of times when they’d have no money and the gas or electricity would be stopped. One time they had the water stopped, and one time they even had all their life lines cut.

“Sorrrry.” At times like that, even his father would look down and apologize. Honestly, it might have been better to have the man reflect on his actions more, but Totsuka would always end up smiling and comforting him.

“It’s fine, it’s fine, it’ll all work out somehow!”

When they ran out of food, Totsuka would also go out, look at a book of wild plants while picking edible grasses, and make a meal out of it. Totsuka's young childhood was full of original ideas.

"You're a cold-hearted guy." When Totsuka's adoptive father said that with a sulky face, Totsuka had just gotten into middle school, perhaps.

"Even though the parents who threw you away must be pained by having abandoned you in the past, you don't care about that at all and just live on nonchalantly. Heck, even though I really think it's a shame you've got such a hopeless dad, because you're like that I can't get better at all."

"Hey, don't make it sound like it's my fault." When Totsuka said that exasperatedly, his father obediently said "sorry" in reply.

"But, really, you're cold-hearted."

"Hmm, really?"

"You get interested in anything, but you don't cling to anything." Totsuka didn't really know if that would make someone heartless, but it was true that he wasn't attached to anything. In Totsuka's eyes, the world was overflowing with truly interesting things, but he had never feared losing any of it, and he had hardly

ever felt loathe to part with something he lost.

“I hope you’ll be able to find something so important you’ll want to cling to it, too.”

And then Totsuka met Suou.

On the day of Totsuka’s adoptive father’s funeral, Suou and Kusanagi came.

Kusanagi was dressed properly, but Suou came towards the end of the ceremony wearing his usual outfit.

“You know, I’ve been called ‘cold-hearted’ by that man before.” After the simple ceremony ended and so did the cleanup, Totsuka was talking to Suou. Totsuka was smiling, as usual.

“At the time I was like ‘what’, but I might be cold-hearted after all.” Suou didn’t say anything, and just stood there with an expression that made it hard to tell whether he was listening or not.

“That man, well, honestly he was pretty hopeless, his wife ran away, and he was super poor, but he only did what he liked and didn’t have a bad life... I might

really be heartless if that's the kind of thing I think about rather than being sad."

Totsuka had liked his father. He hadn't felt any filial love, but he had liked the man as a pleasant person to live with. But even after he died, no tears would come out. Suddenly, Suou's hand grabbed Totsuka's head.

"Ow!" He was released right away. Totsuka held his head, with its hair now messed up from the rough handling, and stared.

"Come on." Said Suou as he turned around and started walking away.

"You wanted to see me be king, didn't you."

Totsuka smiled.

He smiled, and went after Suou.

That night, Totsuka spent his time as usual in the bar HOMRA.

After closing, when he tried to get behind the counter and help with the cleanup, Kusanagi tried to be thoughtful of him since he had just lost a relative and told him he could rest. But Totsuka somehow couldn't bear that kind of

consideration, and said “I’m bored” jokingly while helping out anyway.

For a while, the only sounds filling the dark bar were that of glasses being washed and silverware being stacked. Suou had already gone upstairs to sleep. While wiping off the dishes with a cloth, Totsuka listened to the upstairs. There wasn’t a single noise. “I wonder what kind of dream King is having” Totsuka thought quietly to himself.

“I wonder if King regrets it” Totsuka sighed with a vague smile. Kusanagi stopped what he was doing looked in Totsuka’s direction questioningly.

“Regrets what?”

“Becoming a king.” Totsuka had a faint smile on his face, but these were feelings that he had had secretly kept deep within his chest for a long time. Kusanagi frowned in a troubled way.

“...well, he was forcibly chosen by the "Slate", so it ain’t like he had any choice in the matter.“

Totsuka was about to nod and say I suppose, but before he could, Kusanagi spoke again.

"What about you? Have you got some regrets?" Totsuka’s eyes widened a little

as he looked at Kusanagi. Kusanagi was smiling wryly in a way that was even more mature than usual.

“That you called that guy somethin’ like ‘King’. That that guy wished to become a king.”

Totsuka wasn’t able to reply right away. Totsuka, who normally never became speechless, ended up clamming up for a few seconds, then finally smiled limply.

”...Well, you see, Kusanagi-san. I don’t regret it.“ He again recalled the voice of his father when the man had called him cold-hearted.

...Even if I find something so important to me that I want to cling to it, in the end, I’m still cold-hearted and selfish.

"Ain’t that just fine, though?" Said Kusanagi with a small smile.

“Anyway, it ain’t like me and you made that guy into a king. We shouldn’t be so full of ourselves.” Kusanagi said it so jokingly, Totsuka also brightly replied mockingly.

“But, you know, they say there’s power in words, don’t they? Maybe the "Slate” noticed that person because I wouldn’t stop calling him a king.“

"You're a moron, aren't you."

"...yeah, I'm a moron." Said Totsuka while still smiling.

Totsuka decided this would be the end of those useless doubts. Suou had become king. It was what Totsuka had always wished to see vaguely, and yet since the time they had met.

Totsuka would from now on and forever continue to push Suou forward as king. With all his body and soul, he would continue to push Suou forward, while protecting this place that was created with Suou at its heart and the threads that tied Suou down.

Chapter 6: The Girl in Red

Opening his eyes, Kusanagi looked blankly up at the white ceiling for a while.

His back was hurting, probably because he had been sleeping on the sofa. Why am I sleeping on the sofa? He thought about it for a moment with his groggy head, then immediately remembered. While biting down a yawn, he got down off the sofa and onto his legs, which had been sticking out. He headed towards the bedroom.

Kusanagi cracked open the door and looked at the two sleeping on the bed. Suou, asleep facing the edge of the bed, and Anna snuggled up to his back. They seemed to be sleeping well, and he could hear them breathing peacefully. Kusanagi smiled wryly and shut the door.

They ended up clearing out the closet on the second floor of 'HOMRA' and renovating it a little to be Anna's room. It was still in progress, so for the time being, she was going to stay at Kusanagi's apartment- but since she held on tight to Suou's clothes when he brought her over and wouldn't let go, he ended up sleeping over too. Considering everything that had happened to her, they didn't have the heart to go against her will.

...he thought it probably wouldn't be a very good habit for her to get into, but he

decided they ought to spoil her for today and chased Suou (who was making a face) into the room with Anna. To Kusanagi, it was actually rather unusual and enjoyable to see Suou giving in to Anna's request despite giving such a pained look.

Kusanagi took a short shower, put on some pants, then tended to the injuries on his arm and shoulder. He held one end of the bandages in his teeth while he wrapped them up. After that, he picked up his phone while toweling off his hair. The person he phoned picked up within a few seconds.

"Hello. Good morniiiiing."

"Mornin'. Totsuka, when will you get here?"

"Soon?"

From the background of Totsuka's reply, which was for some reason phrased as a question, Kusanagi could hear the sounds of cars and people arguing.

"Are you outside right now? Are you already coming over?"

"Yeah. I'll be there in about ten minutes."

"Did you already eat?"

“Nope. Ah, I bought Anna some strawberry jello and blood orange juice, so include that with breakfast.”

“Got it. Do you want your eggs in an omelette or with bacon?”

“Make it how Anna likes it.”

“She’s still asleep. I’ll wake her up when the food’s ready.”

“Omelettes, then.”

Kusanagi slipped into a shirt as he was holding that idle conversation. At the same time, he paused for a moment when his eyes settled on his own back being reflected in the mirror. On his right shoulderblade, there was the 'proof' that he was Suou’s clansman. Seeing that, Kusanagi thought of Anna and absentmindedly let out a bitter laugh.

Anna had become a member of Suou’s clan.

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What Kamamoto told them after he woke up hadn’t been very straight to the point. The only thing that was clear was that Honami had come to the Center.

And that the 'rabbits' appeared there. That's where Kamamoto's memory cut off. The one who explained the situation was the Strain boy evacuating from the Center who had seen what happened.

According to him, the 'rabbits' approached Kamamoto who had run up to Honami and he had collapsed onto his back after one of them waved their hand in front of his face. Honami panicked and tried to see to him, but one of the 'rabbits' did the same thing to her. When the 'rabbit's' fingers, poking out from their long sleeve, sparkled, Honami apparently also fell like a doll with its strings cut. A 'rabbit' caught her, then took her away.

Afterwards, the 'rabbits' caused a stir by arriving in the middle of the mostly settled fight between Homura and Scepter 4 in the courtyard. Within that fuss, the Strain boy hadn't been able to decide what to do, so he just went up to the fallen Kamamoto and was sitting by his side. Hearing this, Anna's already pale skin became even whiter. With a stiff expression, she took a red marble from her pocket, closed her eyes once to calm herself down for concentration, opened her eyes wide, then peeked into the marble.

The time Anna spent staring at somewhere through the marble was about thirty seconds. However, to those watching around her, it felt like a very long time. As she looked into the marble, those around her made no noise or movement. It was a tense atmosphere where they couldn't. Eventually, Anna relaxed. Her tensed

body loosened, and she dropped the arm holding that marble. It wasn't possible to tell immediately from her expression whether this was from shock or relief.

“Honami is okay.” She spoke in an unreadable voice. Kusanagi became uneasy seeing Anna claim things were alright with such a stiff look, and he asked while watching her.

“...nothing happened to her?”

“Nothing happened.” Said Anna shortly as she looked down.

“Nothing's wrong.”

Kusanagi looked at Suou. Suou was frowning and looking down at Anna.

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After arriving, Totsuka had to help prepare breakfast.

“Every time I come over, this place is so clean it gets on my nerves.”

Totsuka looked around the apartment while cutting tomatoes up into bite sized pieces. The counter kitchen was big enough for two people to work in it without

feeling cramped, the wide living room was nice and sunny, and light softly filtered in through the large window.

“The enrichment of necessities results in the enrichment of life.” Said Kusanagi as he tilted the fry pan and folded the omelette. The cheese in the eggs melted and sizzled. Anna looked in from the bedroom, perhaps lured in by the smell. Totsuka smiled at her.

“Good morning, Anna. Where’s King?”

“Still asleep.”

“Tell him breakfast’s ready and get him up.”

Anna obediently nodded to Kusanagi’s words and returned to the bedroom. Even though he’s the one who asked, he became a bit worried about whether that guy who was horrible about waking up could be awoken by a quiet little girl shaking him.

“What are we going to do about Anna’s clothes for today?”

The blue clothes she had worn yesterday were in tatters from getting dirtied and touched by embers in the fuss. And anyway, if possible, she’d rather not wear them again.

“Wonder if she can’t wear my shirt. If she put it on, it’d be like a one piece dress, wouldn’t it?”

“Maybe... but wouldn’t it be kinda indecent? Somehow.”

“.....maybe so.”

As they were talking, Anna reappeared. Who knows how she managed to wake him up, but Suou was behind her. After coming out looking sleepy and in a bad mood, he scratched his head and collapsed into the living room’s couch. Kusanagi smiled wryly and slowly poured some fresh coffee from the server to a cup. Today, they were planning on going to buy clothes for Anna.

After finishing breakfast, they managed to get together Anna’s clothes for going out. When they asked her if she’d rather wear her messed up blue clothes from yesterday or Kusanagi’s shirt, she ended up choosing the shirt. Totsuka gathered it up at the shoulder and pinned it with a safety pin, then tied a cloth cord at the waist like a ribbon. The sleeves, which were too long, were also tied up at the shoulders with cord. The shoulders, full of pins and cords and other things, were hidden under a scarf, so that it looked surprisingly like just clothes of that design and actually looked cute. As they walked through the town, Anna held on to Suou’s clothes, and was looking all around uneasily. Totsuka spoke to her from

behind.

“Head on in to any store and pick the one you like, okay?”

It was a street with various clothing stores, but Anna just walked by them all while looking troubled at them from outside.

“I guess it might just make it harder to say anything’s fine.” Totsuka tilted his head at Anna, who shrunk back a little.

“Is there any kinda outfit you particularly like?” When Kusanagi asked, Anna’s gaze still wavered in an unsure way.

“I guess she doesn’t really fit the image of a normal kid. Maybe she’d look good in a frilly dress kind of thing after all?”

“But that’s that Center chief’s taste, isn’t it.”

“Mm, I guess...”

As Totsuka and Kusanagi talked and twisted their necks, Anna looked up at them and spoke.

“I liked the shape of those clothes... Honami also said they were cute.”

Kusanagi felt guilty about making Anna bring up Honami, but she looked peaceful.

“Hurry up and choose.”

Suou glanced back at Anna and said that like this was a pain. He sounded bored already, even though they hadn't entered a single store yet. Anna didn't look scared at all by his bad mood, and if anything she seemed to calm down a little and looked around the area. Suddenly, her eyes stopped on a certain shop's window.

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Taking along Anna who had confirmed Honami's safety through her red marble, Suou left the Center and headed towards Honami's apartment.

He felt a little regret.

The reason why she had left the bar- not only left it, but probably gone to some extreme lengths to do so as he had left some Homura members there- was likely because he hadn't explained things to her properly. It wasn't something that could be explained away easily, and Suou was bad at talking over things or persuading people in the first place. But he hadn't felt like leaving it up to

Kusanagi or Totsuka either, and had ended up practically threatening her. In the end, those threats hadn't worked on her. He should have known how stubborn she was when it came down to it.

Anna didn't say a word. When they arrived at Honami's apartment, she also didn't speak as they went up the stairs, and simply held on to Suou's clothes as she moved her legs. Anna had confirmed Honami's safety with her power. In which case, it had to be the case. As he thought that, Suou rang the doorbell. There was an immediate response. After the sound of someone rushing through the apartment, the door opened.

“Oh my, Suou-kun.”

Honami saw Suou at the door and a smile bloomed on her face. Suou frowned questioningly at how normal her smile was. Suddenly, Honami's eyes landed at Anna, who was beside Suou. However, she didn't act glad at Anna's safety, and merely tilted her head in confusion.

“...Is this Suou-kun's little sister?”

...So that's how it is.

Suou bit down bitter feelings in silence. He had certainly considered the possibility of Honami's memories being sealed by the 'rabbits'. There wasn't any

other reason for them to have gone out of their way to take her. If she had been made to not remember what had happened at the Center today, then while his feelings on that were complicated he did think it was for the best.

However.

Suou looked down at Anna. She showed no sign of being moved, and stared up at Honami. While searching for Honami with her powers, Anna had likely learned of her condition. She had already known that her presence in Honami's heart had been painted over, and she had accepted it.

...You oughta cry.

Suou thought that as he looked at Anna's doll-like expression. Even if crying and begging Honami to remember her wouldn't break the 'rabbit's' spell, it would certainly move Honami's heart. Even if Anna right now was a complete stranger, if she cried and wanted for Honami, then Honami would probably try to accept her. She's that sort of person.

But Anna didn't shed a single tear.

"It's okay." She said that in a clear voice to Suou, while looking at Honami. As though she had seen right through Suou's heart. Honami spoke in a confused voice.

“...Suou-kun... is something... wrong?” He looked at her and frowned.

“...what’s wrong with YOU?”

Honami was crying.

Her eyes were open wide, and shedding tear after tear. She looked confused as she caught her falling tears in her hands. She stared at them in confusion, as Suou could only watch. Suddenly, Anna moved. Her small hand took Honami’s. As though trying to comfort Honami, Anna held Honami’s pale hands tightly, and slowly changed her expression.

Letting go of her doll-like expression, she loosened her tight face. It turned into a smile, a smile that even Suou would have to laugh at as awkward.

“Don’t cry.” With that awkward smile, she spoke kindly to Honami.

“It’s okay.”

Honami blinked. Tears were spilled by her long eyelashes.

“You’re...” Honami looked at Anna in a way that was confused, that was pained, that was fretful. Suou saw that and let out a long sigh.

“I’m sorry I was a bad student until the end.” He said while roughly wiping her tear-streaked cheek on his palm.

“What are you saying?”

“...no.” He laughed a little, bitterly.

“It’s nothing.”

He turned away. 'Suou-kun?' She asked in a confused way, but he didn't turn around again. After a pause, Anna's tiny footsteps followed. He listened to that as he silently walked away. They left the apartment, then passed through the park across from it. Without speaking a word, and keeping up a strange distance. Suou frowned in a foul mood, kept his hands in his pockets, and just slowed down enough for Anna to keep up.

When they passed the park's entrance, Anna abruptly stopped behind him. After going on a bit further, he stopped and turned around. Anna was staring at him with a transparent expression. It was an empty park. Suou didn't know this, but it was the place where Totsuka and Kusanagi had once tried to convince Anna and failed.

“Mikoto.”

Anna called him quietly, and held out her hands to him as though asking for something.

“I want Mikoto’s red.”

Suou shifted slightly inside at those straightforward words. Anna was both an immature and dangerous Strain. As Mizuchi had been obsessed with her, she also held an ability that would make her easily targeted by others. Going by how the 'rabbits' had erased her from Honami's memory, it likely meant that they no longer thought it safe to leave her with civilians. However, it was just after that fuss. The red clan wouldn't allow for her to be taken in by the golden clan. In other words, the golden clan was compromising by allowing the red clan to keep Anna.

It could also be seen as the red clan being told to take responsibility. However, even now, Suou was still unsure.

...Am I scared? Of being entrusted with one brat's life.

The heaviness he felt as he increased his comrades. Sometimes, Suou would feel a discomfort he could do nothing about as he was entrusted with people's lives and feelings as king. It slightly resembled fear.

“I don't plan on throwing you out... but I can't guarantee anything, either.”

“That’s fine.” Anna replied immediately to Suou’s unfair wording.

“I’m going to follow Mikoto because that’s what I want to do.” Her eyes didn’t waver.

“Mikoto doesn’t have to promise anything.”

Suou felt as though he had completely lost to her, and smiled a little, bitterly. He slowly held one hand out to her. In front of her, his hand was surrounded in red flame. The red glow reflected on her pale cheeks and danced. Anna’s eyes, which could only see red, stared at his flame.

“Can you take this hand?”

Suou said that in a way that was still a little unsure, but Anna didn’t hesitate even a moment. She grabbed his hand with both of hers, and treating it as if it were a precious treasure, she hugged it to her chest. The fire spread from Suou’s hand to her whole body. It was a flame of providence, which would never burn her.

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Scepter 4 was to be disbanded.

The first person Shiotsu informed of that was not his own subordinates, but rather someone who used to be his comrade.

“I dragged it on for ten years, but... really, I should have done it back then... like you.”

The person on the other end of the phone didn't try to reply. He never said anything more than he needed, only did what was needed, and had decided his own retirement.

“Directly after the previous leader's death, when you left Scepter 4, I felt like I had been abandoned and resented you... but your decisions are always correct.”

The burden of being replacement leader had been too heavy for Shiotsu. He had tried to carry around a burden too heavy for him to walk around with, and let the important things spill out of his hands as everything became twisted.

“If you had become the replacement instead of me, maybe things would've been different... Zenjō.”

The man who had once been the blue king's right hand made no reply after all to Shiotsu's whisper, which was like a complaint. Shiotsu smiled bitterly at this

situation, where he seemed to be talking to himself at a terminal.

“Anyway, I just wanted to report. I guess it’s something you wouldn’t be interested in anymore, though.”

“Shiotsu.”

Zenjou called his name. Across the terminal, his deep voice struck Shiotsu’s ears.

“I’m sorry.” It was a flatly delivered apology. But Shiotsu smiled wryly as he felt the many meanings stuffed into those short words.

“...that’s my line.”

Another blue king would surely be born someday. However, Shiotsu was no longer fit to serve the new king. He closed his eyes, then imagined the new king in his mind.

Ending his call to his old acquaintance, Shiotsu finally noticed a presence within the room. Minato Hayato and Minato Akito, the twin brothers, were standing at the door.

“Scepter 4’s disbanding?” Said the older black-haired twin, Minato Hayato, in a

dazed voice. The twins, who had always worn masklike expressions, were visibly shaken.

“Yes.”

“Meaning, Scepter 4’s going to get taken apart along with the Center?” The younger brown-haired twin, Minato Akito said that. His voice was wavering thinly.

Shiotsu softened his wrinkled expression.

“...yes. But, either way, it was about time.”

Shiotsu felt guilty as he watched the twins’ faces. They had become clansmen as children, and what they used for support after their king had died on them was their 'cause'. However, that cause had become twisted as the twins became stronger. 'Rules' became everything, and they judged anyone who broke those rules under the name of their cause. However, in the end, that cause was nothing but an excuse for them to use their special powers.

“I’m sorry.” Shiotsu said quietly.

He was responsible for these two remaining children as their bodies and not their hearts grew, and for letting them grow twisted. He remembered the look on their

king's face ten years ago as the two of them begged to be made clansmen and he allowed it.

“...a new blue king will be born, I'm sure... If you two want to serve them, you'll probably need to change.”

The twins twisted their faces at Shiotsu's words.

“...It's not like,”

“-we want to serve a new king.”

Shiotsu smiled wryly at the twins, who shared their words between them. He remembered how the two of them had innocently looked up to their previous king.

“Yeah.” To him as well, there would only ever be one king.

'Yeah', he whispered to himself once more, relaxed as he let out a long sigh, and quietly closed his eyes.

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Deep red clothes with lots of lace.

The sleeves were flared, and so was the skirt that went down just a bit past her knees. Placed on the side of her hair was a little red hat. It was tied down on the opposite side by a red ribbon. Her shoes were also red with shiny enamel. Wearing that, Anna looked down at herself, and turned around and around trying to twist around and see herself from behind as well. As usual, it was difficult to read her expression and tell whether she was excited about her new clothes or confused by them.

However, the air about her was soft.

Anna and company who returned to 'HOMRA' were welcomed by the members of Homura. Everyone knew that she had become Suou's clansman. They were a bit unsure how to act, since they had never had someone like a little girl for a clansmate before, but they still welcomed her brightly.

"Man, you really do look better in red, don't you?" Yata tried to do something unusual by praising a girl's clothes, but it seemed like it hadn't really gotten across, and Anna just tilted her head in confusion. Kamamoto brought a bunch of candy and spread it out across the table.

"Here, eat whichever one you want."

As always, Fushimi watched from as distance as the members of Homura fussed around Anna. Suou sank into the sofa beside Anna, and watched her and the guys around her sleepily. Kusanagi was working on the preparations to open the bar that night. Totsuka was also behind the counter and helping out.

“Mikoto always put on a face like he didn’t know what to do with her, but now that he’s given up, they might actually get along pretty well.” Said Kusanagi from behind the counter as he watched the two of them. Totsuka smiled and nodded.

“Doesn’t look like there’d be much conversation, though.”

Totsuka suddenly thought about something while checking on the ingredients.

“Say, if Anna had really become king... I wonder what kind of king she’d have been.” It was the sort of conversation that could be had because Anna was safe. Kusanagi smiled and joined in.

“She’s a bright kid. She might’ve actually been a much better king than someone like Mikoto.” He said that jokingly, and Totsuka lightly laughed.

“I bet they would’ve gotten along as kings, too.”

While finishing up the cooking Kamamoto had started for them, Kusanagi

looked away a little as though thinking.

“...before that, I wonder... what exactly IS a 'king', anyway.”

Mizuchi, who had been charmed by the 'Slate' into his own destruction. He didn't feel even a shred of desire to understand that guy, but even then, he also felt like he wanted to know about the 'Slate' which chose 'kings' and gave them power.

“To Mikoto, a throne is just a chain.” Kusanagi said that quietly, like he was talking to himself.

I know.

Totsuka, Kusanagi, and the other members of Homura, were all chains holding Suou down. Totsuka was well aware of that, and thought that that was his most important role.

And now, Suou had put on a new, innocent chain.

“But I won't let anyone say he's unhappy.” Totsuka told Kusanagi with a smile.

He couldn't truly understand the smoldering gloom within Suou, or the burden Suou held.

However, Totsuka didn't believe that this place called Homura which had gathered around Suou was not giving him any sort of repose.

“It'll be fine, it'll be fine, it'll all work out!” When Totsuka said that so optimistically with a smile, it infected Kusanagi and he smiled back.

“Yeah.”

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Within Anna's left eye, there was a faint warmth.

That was the proof of the flame she received from Suou. She didn't have the same 'proof' on her skin that her comrades did. She was a bit disappointed by that, but if she looked closely into a mirror, she could sometimes see the 'proof' in her left eye.

Surrounded by everyone on the bar's sofa, Anna gently put her hand to her chest. She had the red she received from him in there. When she was beside Suou, the red within her body would lightly hold heat, and become warm. Anna looked quietly up at Suou sitting beside her. He was staring off into space sleepily. His

form took on color within her formerly monochrome world. Suou's body was always faintly surrounded by the fierce red light he held, which was more beautiful than anything else. As though looking at a treasure, Anna dearly burned Suou into her eyes.

A faint smile rose to her face.

...Mikoto's red is prettiest.

Side Story: A New Life

A canopy with red curtains adorned a small bed fit for a little princess. It occupied the middle of the room; a small table suitable for children stood next to the window, and across from it, there were bookshelves; an antique-looking wooden closet was placed against the opposite wall.

Anna's big eyes got even bigger as she looked around the room. Kusanagi watched Anna with a smile on his lips.

After having gazed around the room to her heart's content, Anna half-turned to him calling out his name, "Izumo."

"Yes?"

Anna opened and closed her mouth a few times as if trying to find the right words and finally voiced only one, "Thanks."

For Anna to have her own room, a small storage on the second floor of the bar HOMRA was given a full makeover, and also, Kusanagi arranged for the necessary furniture.

From that day on, this room was going to become Anna's home.

“It’s more than enough for me that you seem to like it,” Kusanagi replied curtly, smiling and bending down at the waist slightly.

Trying to answer in kind, Anna lifted the corners of her mouth in an awkward smile.

Unlike Totsuka, Kusanagi wasn’t particularly good at dealing with children, nor did he share an innate understanding of each other’s feelings with Anna, like Suoh did. But it turned out that simply treating her like he would any other person, without forced attempts at babying her, worked just fine due to Anna being mature beyond her years mental age-wise.

“Well, I bet you’re hungry. Let’s go down and have lunch,” Kusanagi said and went downstairs accompanied by Anna.

When they came down to the first floor, they found the scenery that was eerily similar to what a soup kitchen providing emergency rice after a natural disaster must have looked like.

“No, wait, Totsuka-san, it’s clearly overdoing it!”

“But the whole ordeal will be rendered meaningless if the bullet in russian roulette holds no powder, you know?” Totsuka was kneading sinister-looking red paste while Yata attempted to reason with him.

Fushimi, shooting glares that seemed to scream ‘this is so stupid!’ in their direction, was molding onigiri with mechanical motions.

Suoh was sitting on a bar stool at the counter, simply watching the unfolding scene and doing nothing.

“What are you doing?” Kusanagi asked puzzled.

“Ah, Kusanagi-san. Today’s lunch is onigiri!” Totsuka replied in a light tone.

“I can see that. I’m asking what is that thing you’re kneading.”

“The ‘lucky shot’ stuffing. Since this will be onigiri russian roulette.”

“That thing is too spicy! I can tell by the smell alone that it’s inhumanly spicy!”

Yata leaned down to sniff the paste Totsuka was kneading and grimaced.

Meanwhile, Kamamoto, who was standing in front of an electric rice cooker that was brought from the kitchen, was busy stuffing onigiri into his mouth right after they had been molded.

“Kamamoto, you bastard! Stop devouring our lunch!”

“Ouch! I was just taste-sampling it!”

“Who the hell taste-samples onigiri?!”

Across from the shouting Yata and Kamamoto, Totsuka was keeping at his wicked business by putting his poisonous-looking red paste on rice as he smiled

at Anna and asked, “So how did you like your room?”

“...It was beautiful.”

“Well, you’re going to be living here starting today. Is there something that you maybe found lacking?”

“No, everything was fine.”

“Ah, by the way, what should we about breakfast tomorrow? Kusanagi-san isn’t here in the mornings.” Totsuka noted looking at Kusanagi while molding the rice into beautifully shaped triangular onigiri with practiced hand motions.

Ah, right, there’s also this problem, Kusanagi thought folding arms on his chest.

“Well, Mikoto being left here alone with no breakfast is no concern, but now we also have Anna. And Mikoto’s being here changes nothing in that regard...”

“...Even I can make a meal,” Suoh, arms on the counter, chin on his hands, suddenly said with displeasure.

Casting a glance full of unmasked distrust at Suoh, Kusanagi threw up his hands in an exaggerated gesture and shook his head. Even Totsuka, after giving Suoh a sweet smile, ignored his remark, shifting his gaze back to Kusanagi. “Should I come and make Anna’s breakfast, then?”

“Yeah - tomorrow, at least. After that... well, I guess we’ll have to take turns.”

“Hey,” Suoh repeated reluctantly. “I said I can make a damn meal.”

Kusanagi sighed. “Look, Mikoto. When you were left to your own devices

before, you bothered to make a meal based solely on a whim, if at all. You never stick to the proper three meals a day schedule in the first place. You wake up when you feel like it and eat only when you're hungry. An animalistic life style like that isn't suited for Anna."

"But you know, Anna's addition to our numbers might be the chance for King to improve his life style! How great would it be if he started to lead a healthy life where he'd get up at 7 in the morning, make breakfast and eat it with Anna?"

Under the pressure of the lecture from the irritated-looking Kusanagi and the suggestion from the grinning Totsuka, Suoh promptly averted his eyes.

"Well, I'm hungry, so how about we get to eating?" Kamamoto had the nerve to interrupt them with a statement that was nothing short of shameless seeing as there were grains of rice stuck to his face around the mouth.

"Agreed. Besides, the 'live round' for our russian roulette is locked and loaded!"

"Geh! When did you...?!"

Apparently, Totsuka managed to sneak the onigiri that contained his evil superhot paste onto the plate with the rest of them when nobody was watching.

"Haa..." Kusanagi could only sigh. "What if Anna gets it?"

"I won't." Anna was the one who said this. She took a red glass marble out of

her pocket and held it to her left eye.

“Ah! It’s not fair to use your ability!” Yata accused, but the smiling Totsuka placated him, “It’s perfectly acceptable as long as you do your best utilizing the abilities you have at your disposal.”

After scrutinizing the stack of onigiri through her marble, Anna picked one.

Fushimi was up next, and it didn’t take him any time at all to choose. Yata’s eyes widened at his complete lack of hesitation.

“What admirable resolve, Saruhiko,” Kusanagi commented.

“I put an inconspicuous mark on the onigiri I made myself. I wouldn’t want to be the loser of this punishment game, and also, I dislike dried plum, konbu and walleye pollack roe, so I wouldn’t want to end up taking any of them either.”

“Hey, that’s totally cheating!”

“It’s nothing more than doing your best utilizing the abilities at your disposal which is perfectly acceptable.”

Twisting his lips angrily, Yata stared at the plate with the onigiri as he carefully chose one.

Next, one by one, the others stepped to the plate and picked an onigiri to their liking.

Suoh was the last to casually grab one.

“Well then, to the start of Anna’s new life!” Totsuka declared, raising his onigiri high in the air.

“Cheers!” All present joined in Totsuka’s toast raising their onigiri as well, despite the feeling that something about this whole setting was clearly off. Then, everybody bit into their respective rice treat.

“Whoa, this is yummy!”

“Ah, I got the tuna and mayonnaise filling!”

Relieved voices could be heard all around. Kusanagi found that his onigiri was filled with salmon roe salted just right.

Amidst the sighs of relief, there was one person who frowned, furrowing his brows, and stopped eating after taking a bite, and that person was Suoh.

Totsuka grinned. “That’s King for you! Luck of the draw is on your side!”

Suoh glared at the onigiri, which now had the evil red paste sticking out of its side, as if it was his personal mortal enemy but finished it in two bites.

“Wow...” A shared exclamation of admiration resounded in the room.

Suoh was still scowling when Anna lightly pulled at the hem of his clothes.

“Next time, I’ll make the meal, and I’ll tell you which one not to take.”

Hearing these comforting words from her only made Suoh’s scowl deepen, and he gave Anna a light flick on the forehead in retaliation.